

## **Al-Zarnuji's Educational Concept and Its Relevance to the Teaching of Islamic Education in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the educational concept of the 10th-century Islamic scholar Al-Zarnuji and its relevance to the teaching of Islamic Education in Malaysia. This literature analysis aims to determine the applicability of Al-Zarnuji's educational concept for educational reform in the current Islamic education system in Malaysia by examining previous Islamic educational concepts and how they can enhance the current system. The study employed content analysis from various resources related to the ideas of education from Al-Zarnuji. The study found that Al-Zarnuji highlights the moral, intellectual, spiritual, and social aspects of an individual's development in his book "Ta'lim Al-Muta'allim." His method of teaching encourages critical thinking, moral learning, and active student participation. His emphasis on developing moral character, cultivating virtues, and moral behavior is consistent with the National Educational Philosophy and Islamic education goals, which focus on the development of diverse and balanced individuals.

**Keywords:** *Al-Zarnuji, Islamic Education, Method of Teaching, Educational Reform, Moral Development*

## INTRODUCTION

The field of education has significantly benefited from the historical contributions of Islamic scholars, and their concepts are still applicable in modern educational settings. Islam's sacred scripture, the Quran, and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad serve as the foundation for Islamic education (Huda et al., 2016). An essential part of Islamic education's foundational ideas came from classical Muslim scholars' works. To achieve this, they articulated unique intellectual views about education from an Islamic viewpoint. Islamic scholars' teaching approach and educational perspective are two sides of the same coin, not two distinct things. The idea offers guidance, and the technique puts that guidance into actual classroom activities to produce well-rounded people who flourish in both material and spiritual spheres.

It is noteworthy that Islamic research is subject to various interpretations and approaches, leading to differences in pedagogical concepts and practices. A comprehensive method of teaching Islam knowledge that provides its students with the material, intellectual, and spiritual tools they need to fulfil their divinely mandated tasks as His vicegerents and servants on earth (Kamal Hassan, 1986 as cited in Fauzi & Rajaratnam, 2010). Islamic education aims to create students who are well-rounded, well-informed, ethical, and well-mannered citizens who make a positive contribution to society. Although the ways of teaching change with the times and the demands of society, the fundamental values of Islamic education remain the same.

Al-Zarnuji's education concept stressed his ideas' moral, intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions. Huda et al. (2016) also emphasized that the curriculum should be well-balanced to help students develop their cognitive (or reason-based) capacities while enabling students to uphold morality in behaviour as part of the learning process. This idea of education helps students learn more effectively and efficiently.

The Al-Zarnuji concepts should be implemented in Islamic education as a way of reforming the teaching method in Islamic education in Malaysia. It is frequently noted that the book *Ta'limul al Muta'allim* serves as a helpful guide in many Islamic institutions and offers a tremendous ethical discourse on classroom management (Hafidzah, 2014, as cited in Huda et al., 2016). Thus, educators should create instructional strategies aligned with the concept of educational Al-Zarnuji that are still relevant and need to be implemented.

### **The Biography of Al- Zarnuji**

Asrori (2016) stated in his research, Al- Zarnuji or his real name Sheikh Tajuddin Nu'man ibn Ibrahim ibn Khalil al-Zarnuji was born in a renowned town named Zarnuj located along the Oxus River in the eastern region of modern-day Turkistan (Yahya, 2005 as cited in Huda et al., 2016). However, scholars have different opinions on his real name. Instead of Sheikh Tajuddin, his name is Burhanuddin. Al-Zarnuji, whose theology was founded on the Hanafi School of Islamic Jurisprudence, lived in the 12th and 13th centuries CE (Muizuddin, 2014, as cited in Huda et al., 2017). The era he lived in is still debated by historians today (Affandi, 1993).

During the Abbasid era, he was a prominent figure in Islamic education and one of its philosophers and pioneers. As mentioned in Huda et al. (2016), his ideas on education are summarized in the book *Ta'lim al Muta'allim*, which discusses the moral principles that both students and teachers should adhere to improve the quality of instruction and learning.

Al-Zarnuji learned from many famous scholars including the fields of jurisprudence and literature. In his book, he also mentioned some of his teachers as his references in writing the ideas of education. According to Huda et al. (2016) these are some of his teachers mentioned:

1. Burhan al- Din al Kashani (1195 CE).
2. Fakhr al- Islam al- Hasan Ibn Mansur al Farghani Khadikan (1196 CE).
3. Zahir al-Din al- Hasan Ibn 'Ali al- Marghinani (1204 CE).
4. Fakhr al Din al Kashani (1191 CE).
5. Rukn al-Din Muhammad b. Abi Bakr Khwarzade (491-576 AH; Affandi, 1993 as cited in Huda et al., 2016).

A well-known book in education, *Ta'limul Muta'llim*, discusses guidance for teachers and students. Regarding Huda et al. (2016), there are thirteen chapters in the book, each focusing on a different set of guidelines for reducing learning difficulties in students.

In order to help students realize the advantages of education, *Ta'limul Muta'allim* is specifically developed as a guide, offering tips on how to approach their studies, act in a classroom, and behave. Al-Zarnuji covers a wide range of topics in the student's life, such as developing a positive attitude toward study, moral, ethical behaviour, and personal habits. Huda et al. (2016) mentioned that most deal with topics related to the soul's development and the rational mind. Furthermore, this book is frequently used as a reference for academic writing, particularly in education (Wahyuddin, 2018). Yahya (2005, as cited in Huda et al., 2016) stated that it is also accepted as a set of rules that Western and Islamic thinkers use as a significant point of reference when forming academic concepts, particularly in education.

### **Al- Zarnuji Educational Concepts**

In *Ta'limul al Muta'allim*, he emphasizes the importance of seeking knowledge, either male or female. Seeking knowledge for religious and academic knowledge that we need to know to survive life. According to Al-Zarnuji, seeking knowledge is one of the ways to achieve happiness in the world and hereafter. Knowledge becomes a medium to get piety (Taqwa). By piety, man can get an honourable place in the eyes of Allah and lead to happiness in the world and the hereafter.

Al-Zarnuji categorized knowledge into four categories, from the fundamentals of knowledge to the needs in life. Firstly, the fundamental knowledge of every Muslim is *Fardhu A'in*. This knowledge is an obligation for all Muslims to learn. The most required knowledge to learn is *Tawheed*. After that, Muslims must learn jurisprudence, law, and other Islamic knowledge. Secondly, the knowledge that not all Muslims need to learn but encourage Muslims to learn. This is *Fardhu Kifayah* such as *salat al-janazah*. In addition, he also enhances the student's need to know the characteristics of humans, such as arrogance, chastity, humility, generosity, courage, and many others. The significance of learning these ideas is to become self-protection from bad characteristics. Avoiding bad characteristics can be done by acknowledging these characteristics.

Al-Zarnuji prevents the learners from learning illicit knowledge, such as knowledge of astrology to predict the luck that can lead to *syirik* as the third category. On the other hand, the knowledge of astrology must be used to know the direction of *Qiblah* and prayers' time. Lastly, a knowledge of worldly necessities such as medicine is required. The students need to find out what is helpful for them and avoid what can harm their souls. Using their intelligence and knowledge, the students can lead themselves toward Allah's obligation.

Gaining knowledge through the process of teaching and learning including teacher and students. Al-Zarnuji also stressed the roles of teachers and students in delivering and accepting knowledge. In *Ta'limul Muta'allim*, Al-Zarnuji also pointed out the method of teaching and learning. The concept of learning must start with pure intention. Align with intention, the students must know how to choose the area of study, how to choose teachers and friends, and the steps of learning.

The students must start their learning by choosing knowledge, from the obligation, such as the fundamentals of Islamic knowledge, to knowledge of world necessities. When choosing a teacher, the students need to find the most knowledgeable teacher older than them. When finding friends, choosing someone hardworking, has good manners, is easy to understand the lesson, is not lazy, and talks less is encouraging.

According to Al-Zarnuji, the learning method highlighted the best time for students to study. He emboldened students to study on Wednesday because Wednesday is the perfect day to start something based on the Hadith of Rasulullah. In addition, his teacher also encourages him to start all the good things on Wednesday. When learning new knowledge, the students need to start with repetition until they understand the lesson. In his opinion, learning one letter must be with a thousand repetitions. Moreover, the students should begin with a handy subject for easy understanding. It can make the learning process more practised rather than boring. Learners need to master and fully understand what they have learned before they move to another subject or new knowledge.

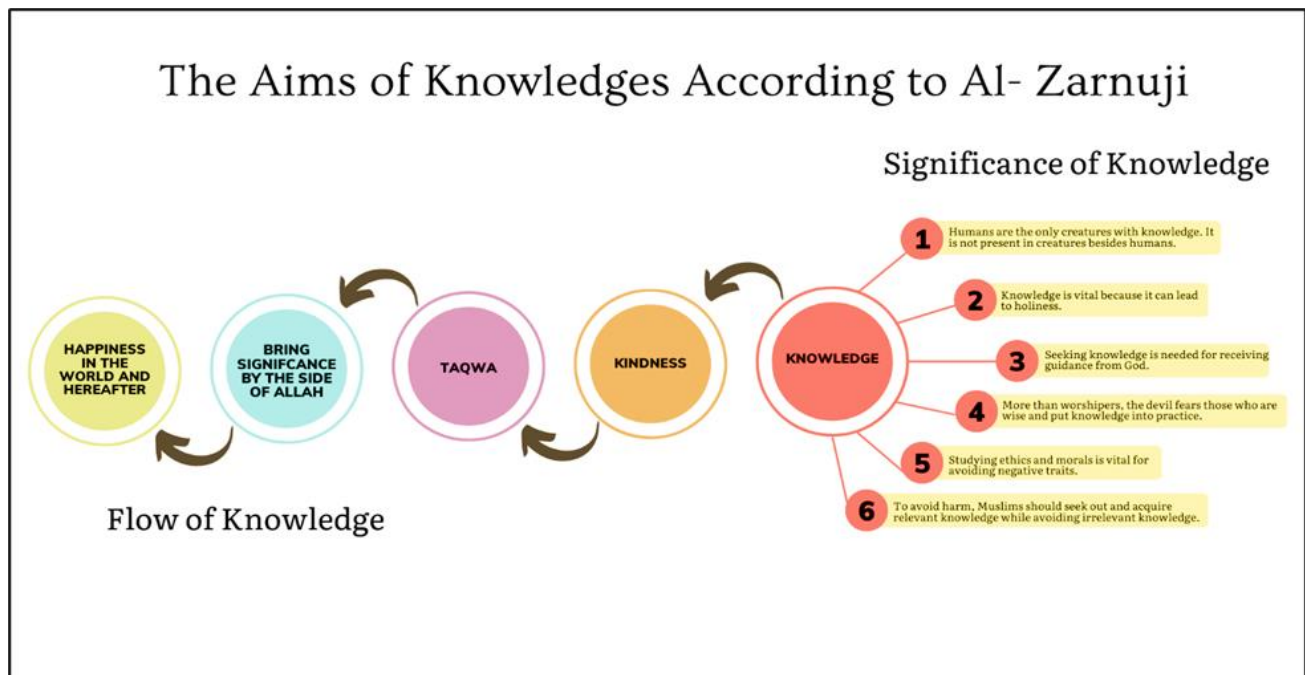
Learners should record what they have studied and commit to memory in notes. However, the learners ought to comprehend what they wrote in their notes. The students must work hard to comprehend the lessons. By doing so, Al-Zarnuji suggested the importance of thinking often and repeating what was being taught to the students. Al-Zarnuji also encourages the learners to debate, discuss, and exchange views to find the truth. Maslani et al. (2018) stated that implementation methods of discussion include *munazharah* (public debate), *mutharahah* (forum of discussion), *mudzakarah* (changing one's mind), and *daur al ta'ammul fi al-ta'lim*, which is thinking process. Lastly, the students should pray to Allah. Al-Zarnuji insisted that learners need to put the effort from their heart into learning. Learners need to revise what they have learned continuously. Early evening, or the period between *Maghrib* and *Isya*, and late night or *Sahoor* time, are the recommended times for revising. Also, rather than pressuring themselves, learners should learn to love who they are. Students ought to establish and accomplish goals or ambitions when they are studying.

Regarding the social components, students ought to respect their teachers, friends, and knowledge, especially while engaging in discussion with them. Respecting knowledge by respecting the teachers. Al-Zarnuji illustrated that in respecting teachers, learners must have ethics with teachers, such as not sitting in the teacher's seat, not walking in front of the teacher, avoiding something that makes the teacher angry, and obeying their rules. In addition, the students need to respect all the people related to the teachers. By respecting teachers, students will be blessed with their knowledge. Respecting friends by glorifying and respecting friends and respecting knowledge by constantly purifying during the process of learning. Taking ablution before learning starts is absolutely emboldening.

Regarding the teacher's role in the learning process, Al-Zarnuji recommended starting the lesson from the easiest to understand to the most complex. Start the new lesson by teaching it two times and letting the students memorize until they understand. At the same time, the teachers should add the new lesson piecemeal. He also urged the use of the discussion method because, via discussion and dialogue, the student can reflect and rethink to seek the significance of knowledge.

## Diagram 1

*The Aims of Knowledge According to Al-Zarnuji*



## Islamic Education in Malaysia

In Malaysia, Islamic education has a rich and colourful history that is tightly interwoven into the nation's social and cultural concepts. Due to its varied geography, Muslims have many opportunities to learn more about their faith and prepare for various social roles. Malaysia's devotion to Islam as the official religion is shown in the prominent position that Islamic education plays in the educational system of the nation. Islamic education greatly impacts the nation's intellectual, social, and cultural environment. As mentioned by Al-Attas (1999), instead of producing excellent citizens, which is the same as in Western culture, Islamic education aims to produce a good man. Within the notion of a good man, "good" refers specifically to the man of adab, embracing both the material and spiritual aspects of human existence.

Muslims in the early days of Malacca were familiar with religious education (Hashim et al., 2011). Islamic education in Malaysia originates in the Malacca Sultanate of the fifteenth century. As Malacca developed into a hub of Islamic scholarships, academics from all across the region came to study there. Traditional pondok schools, known for emphasising religious knowledge and personal development, became established during this time. Thus, the pondok system can be defined as an extension of learning Islam in the home or mosque, which includes a designated space where students study under the instructor's supervision (Nor, 2010, as cited in Hashim et al., 2011).

Following the independence of Malaya on August 31, 1957, the post-independence development in Islamic education, Malaysia has actively contributed to the advancement of Islamic education and its integration into the country's educational framework. The Ministry of Education established the Islamic Education Division to supervise the administration and curriculum of Islamic schools (Fauzi & Rajaratnam, 2010). The official curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Malaysia incorporates Islamic subjects. This action was taken to give students a well-rounded education that incorporates both secular and religious subjects. Under the progressive integration of Islamic education by the federal government into the national educational framework, the Education

Act of 1961 established Islamic religious instruction as a fundamental component of the curricula in government primary and secondary schools (Zainal Abidin, 1994 as cited in Abdul Hamid, 2017).

The Ministry of Education released a purportedly innovative Islamic Philosophy of Education to elevate Islamic education's standing within the framework of the country's educational system. The Islamic Philosophy of Education stated "*Islamic Education is a continuous effort to deliver knowledge, skill and emotional experience based on al-Quran and al-Sunnah in order to build behavior, skill, personality, and a view of life as the servant of Allah, responsible for self-development, the community, the environment, and the nation for the sake of prosperity and salvation in this world and the hereafter.*" (Zainal Abidin, 1994 as cited in Abdul Hamid, 2017).

Islamic education covers the following areas, Arabic language, *Sirah* (Islamic History), *Adab* (Ethic), *Tawheed*, *Tajwid*, *Tafsir* (Interpretation), and the Quran and Sunnah. These areas were taught in elementary and secondary education. *Tasawwur Islam* is included in the curriculum for high school students. To achieve the aims of the Islamic Philosophy of Education, Islamic education has curricula that combine modern courses. Abdul Hamid (2017) stated that students can now choose to concentrate in any one of these three streams that are offered: technical-vocational education and religion, science and religion, or humanities/arts and religion. By this combination, the students became well-rounded individuals in theoretical knowledge and practical skills with moral values.

Furthermore, Islamic education not only focuses on the students and the contents of Islamic subjects. The Ministry of Education established the Religious Education Division or *Bahagian Pelajaran Agama* to lead the federal government's effort to coordinate Islamic education. In this division, they are responsible for overseeing the policies and curriculum for Islamic education and Arabic language education, hiring, and preparing teachers of Islamic studies and Arabic language, providing *dakwah* or religious propagation and leadership development for Islamic education personnel and students, and raising the bar for both national secondary religious schools (Abdul Hamid, 2017).

### **The Relevance of Al-Zarnuji Educational Concepts in Teaching Islamic Education in Malaysia**

The pedagogical idea of Al-Zarnuji is still applicable today. His focus on teacher-student interaction, character development, and holistic learning is in line with contemporary educational ideals. Furthermore, his views on adjusting teaching strategies and lifelong learning align with the 21<sup>st</sup> century's dynamic nature of knowledge. Al-Zarnuji's curriculum makes basic Islamic knowledge such as *Fardhu A'in*, and *Tawheed* the first lesson that needs to be learned by students. Teaching Islamic education in Malaysia still emphasizes the fundamentals of Islamic knowledge which is *Fardhu A'in* same as Al-Zarnuji wrote in his book. This topic is mandatory for all students either in primary or secondary school.

Regarding the step of learning suggested by Al-Zarnuji, the contents in Islamic teaching start with the handy topic until the complex by referring to their stage of learning. In addition, the repetition of lessons happens when teachers revise the topic that they have learned. The teacher can increase the lesson day by day. It is most suitable when Al-Zarnuji is recommended to teach the students step by step and guide them until they understand. It can make the students more hardworking in learning and not make them hopeless. Besides, Huda et al. (2017) affirmed it is not the teacher's place to make the students study material they have never heard of. Paramboor and Ibrahim (2014) added that starting with something more accustomed to his level of intellect and more comfortable is best for the students. It is necessary to implement the Al-Zarnuji curriculum by beginning with the simplest task at an early age. Students who are starting early should begin with basic language and comprehension skills. The lesson can be beneficial to the students if they follow this strategy, which can assist them in gradually understanding their curriculum. When teaching Islamic education, a teacher can begin by being

familiar with the fundamentals of the subject. In Malaysia, Islamic educators have already completed it through kindergarten and primary school. At this stage, the students will learn the basic Islamic principles and continue gradually to the complex through stage of learning.

Al-Zarnuji also highlighted the social fabric in his educational concept. In the process of learning, there are several social dimensions of learning, the learner should be sociable as a human (Paramboor & Ibrahim, 2014). In *Ta'limul al Muta'allim*, Al-Zarnuji discussed respecting and choosing teachers and friends. His pedagogical approach fostered discourse over the curriculum and teacher selection. In addition, learners get to select who their friends are by engaging in social interactions. The debate, discourse, and discussion mostly occur during the learning process. The cultivation of creative and critical thinking skills is hindered by the underutilisation of this learning process in Malaysian education. In addition to instructing, the teacher must foster the students' ability to think for themselves. The secondary or tertiary students should actively participate in this debate and discussion to strengthen their critical thinking skills and to apply their creative thinking to explore and create something new that will benefit the community. In the past, Islamic scholars like Imam As-Syafie have applied their intellect to benefit the community by coming up with creative solutions to novel issues facing their community.

Social skills require the regulation of emotions and the capacity for emotional self-control. It is advisable to follow and avoid the traits that Al-Zarnuji exemplified. Teachers should ideally have positive attributes because the learners can acquire character development from them, as they are the ones with whom they associate and engage (Huda et al., 2017). Furthermore, social skills include being able to adjust to everyone and live with others. When students apply the knowledge to their life and their interactions with the community, social skills instruction can be incorporated into Islamic education. Al-Zarnuji emphasized the need to be kind, courteous, and considerate in dealings with teachers, peers, and others. Furthermore, teachers also become a role model in society. According to Huda et al. (2017), when a teacher encounters a challenge in the classroom, character values can provide a solid basis for how they should respond. Another crucial component of social skills is empathy. The students ought to have empathy for other people, including coworkers, the neighborhood, and society at large (Paramboor & Ibrahim, 2014). Furthermore, improved cooperation and problem-solving are fostered by acknowledging and considering the viewpoints, emotions, and experiences of others.

The intellectual and spiritual elements in Al-Zarnuji's book are also relevant in teaching Islamic education. The intellectual aspect includes the thinking process suggested by Al-Zarnuji. He also asserted thinking before speaking. By thinking and asking questions, knowledge can be gained. The cognitive process enables students to generate suitable terminology, which makes thinking essential. Thinking before speaking is vital in the realm of jurisprudence. For the purpose of discovering the truth and solutions, the students must instill the habit of thinking in themselves. Thus, educators try to encourage an attitude of inquiry, the acquisition of information and comprehension, and the deliberate development of worthwhile objectives (Huda et al., 2017).

Maslani et al. (2018) stated that spiritual thought is the content that deals with issues of *mahdlah* worship (connection to the divine). The students must always put their faith in Allah and express gratitude for learning and understanding. Added to that, students must make Allah the main focus of their learning. Apart from that, self-awareness and self-love are also significant components of knowledge acquisition. Students must be aware of their capacity for learning and refrain from overly pressuring themselves. Furthermore, since worldly things can lead to negative behavior and damage the body, mind, and heart, students ought to keep away from them. The teachers should help students to gain strong and motivated spirituals in the process of learning. From the teachers' experience and mental and personal growth can be passed on to the students in order to help learners become more mature thinkers who can apply their principles to become "self-standing" students (Huda et al., 2017).

According to Hulawa (2019), Al-Zarnuji defined Islam's character as learners acting morally and incorporating both mental and physical values in their education. The application of Al-Zarnuji character values is the growth of Quranic values that result in the crystallization of honesty, faith, collaboration among people, and independence as human values, which take the shape of students' core values (Budiman, 2017 as cited in Hulawa, 2019). In Islamic education that nurtures the Quran views its relevance to the students. In his book, Al-Zarnuji highlights a number of moral principles, beginning with the act of learning. Al-Zarnuji's work cultivated a moral character by strengthening hearts and minds. If the mind changed, then so would ethical behavior. He started learning by making intention his first action. It can result in positive outcomes if done with the correct intentions. Additionally, he exhorts the students to work hard and consistently put effort into studying throughout the learning process.

A strong emphasis on picking teachers and friends for learning. Students can be shaped by the impact of their peers and teachers. Learners' ought to select patient and wara' pious teachers. Students will reciprocate educators set such a good example virtue by exhibiting particular character traits and qualities (Osguthorpe, 2008 as cited in Huda et al., 2017). As for the friends, Al-Zarnuji strengthened the relationship with the one who understood the situation easily, was wara', honest, and didn't talk much. Good moral behavior is influenced not only by students' efforts but also by environmental factors. A quality facility and learning tools should have a socially interactive atmosphere that promotes moral principles and fosters complementary connections (Al-Zarnuji & Ismail, 1995 as cited in Maslani et al., 2018).

Several components that Al-Zarnuji highlighted for the learners in learning, should be patience, respecting teachers and friends, avoiding bad manners always being consistent, and having great ambition and trust in Allah. When these qualities are completely formed during the educational process, the result is a person with high moral principles who understands and fulfills their role as Allah's vicegerent on earth (Al-Zarnuji, 2003 as cited in Tumin & Faizzudin, 2017).

Added to that, Huda et al. (2017) stressed a teaching morality becomes an essential component of providing moral growth for students, since doing so will enable them to succeed morally and provide the necessary resources to become successful teachers. Thus, the most competent, skilled, and reliable also align with the characteristics that Al-Zarnuji highlighted, educators must be given priority in Islamic education in Malaysia. To inculcate Al-Quran values in students' morals educators must put effort their utmost effort. All these elements are aligned with the aims of Islamic education in Malaysia. That is why Islamic education should prioritize the most capable, skilled, and trustworthy teachers.

## CONCLUSION

The educational ideas of Al-Zarnuji, which emphasize the moral, intellectual, spiritual, and social components of learning, ought to be used more practically while instructing and learning. The two ways of instruction which are teacher and student-centered become more engaging, foster students' creativity, and result in unique ideas. In order to facilitate free debates among the students, educators need to possess the necessary skills and knowledge. Teachers should practice high ethics in their daily lives and offer a positive example for their students.

Concepts and instructional strategies used by Islamic scholars are in dynamic and ever-evolving connection. This continuous connection signifies that Islamic education aims to develop people who are ethically and intellectually sound, actively participating in the creation of a just and compassionate world, rather than merely receiving knowledge. Even though conventional methods of teaching have worth, teachers must adjust the process of learning to fit the needs of current students and guarantee that Islamic education will continue to be influential and relevant for future generations.



Al-Zarnuji's theory of education holds true for all levels of the primary, secondary, and university education systems. Zarnuji's holistic approach promotes all areas of curriculum, cognition, behaviour, and morals. The idea can be improved with Malaysia's present Islamic academic environment.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Based on the conclusion, it is recommended that the current Islamic education system in Malaysia incorporate Al-Zarnuji's holistic educational approach, emphasizing moral, intellectual, spiritual, and social development at all educational levels. Teacher training should be enhanced to equip educators with skills for facilitating student-centered learning and ethical modelling. Instructional strategies should promote active student participation, creativity, and critical thinking, balancing teacher-centered and student-centered methods. Traditional teaching methods should be adapted to meet contemporary student needs, ensuring the relevance and influence of Islamic education. Focus should be on developing ethically and intellectually sound individuals who contribute to a just and compassionate society. The curriculum should be regularly reviewed and updated, incorporating feedback to maintain effectiveness. Collaborative learning environments should be encouraged to foster discussions and mutual respect. Al-Zarnuji's principles should be integrated with Malaysia's National Educational Philosophy to create a unified framework for developing balanced individuals who positively impact society.

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