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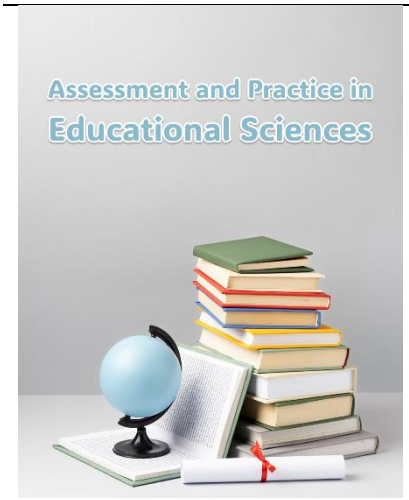

Reconceptualizing Philosophy for Children through Islamic Educational Thought: A Theoretical and Comparative Framework

1. Zahrasadat, Hashemi: Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy and Logic Education, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran (Email: hashemizs@cfu.ac.ir)

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ABSTRACT

Despite the global expansion of Philosophy for Children (P4C), limited research has examined its integration with Islamic educational philosophy within culturally grounded contexts. Existing P4C models largely rely on secular frameworks, leaving a gap in addressing the epistemological, ethical, and spiritual dimensions central to Islamic pedagogy. This study proposes a theoretical and comparative framework that integrates P4C's inquiry-based learning with the holistic principles of hikmah (wisdom), adab (moral discipline), and fitrah (innate disposition) derived from Islamic thought. Through a critical review of literature and conceptual synthesis, the framework identifies convergences—shared emphases on reasoning, moral development, and dialogical engagement—while also mapping divergences in metaphysical assumptions and educational goals. The proposed model (Figure 1) offers practical insights for designing culturally responsive curricula that integrate critical inquiry with spiritually informed values. Findings contribute to debates on intercultural pedagogy, highlight the potential for curriculum innovation in Muslim-majority settings, and open new avenues for empirical applications and policy-oriented research in global educational contexts.

Keywords: Philosophy for Children (P4C); Islamic Educational Philosophy; Hikmah; Adab; Fitrah; Critical and Dialogical Pedagogy; Culturally Responsive Curriculum; Intercultural Pedagogy; Comparative Educational Frameworks

Introduction

Philosophy for Children (P4C) has emerged over the past five decades as a transformative educational approach that emphasizes critical inquiry, ethical dialogue, and democratic engagement among young learners. Developed by Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp in the 1970s, the movement has since expanded globally, sparking debates about its cultural adaptability and philosophical underpinnings (1-3). At its core, P4C seeks to cultivate children's ability to think critically, reason dialogically, and engage reflectively with fundamental human questions. However, scholars increasingly recognize that the application of P4C across diverse educational settings cannot remain philosophically neutral, as it inevitably intersects with

cultural, moral, and spiritual traditions (4-6). This recognition has generated a growing body of research exploring how P4C might be reinterpreted in non-Western or religious contexts, including Islamic education.

Matthew Lipman envisioned P4C as a corrective to the limitations of traditional schooling, which often prioritized rote memorization over critical reasoning and democratic participation. His writings emphasize the cultivation of "communities of inquiry" where students engage collectively in philosophical dialogue to enhance reasoning, ethical awareness, and civic responsibility (1). Ann Sharp, meanwhile, expanded the ethical and social dimensions of P4C, advocating for education that prepares students not only to think critically but also to live responsibly in pluralistic societies (2, 3). More recent global studies confirm that P4C can enrich learning outcomes by fostering critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative skills among children and adolescents (5, 7, 8).

However, critical voices highlight that the secular-humanist assumptions embedded in P4C may not align seamlessly with educational contexts rooted in religious or spiritual worldviews (6, 9). For example, while P4C often frames moral reasoning as a pluralistic negotiation of values, Islamic pedagogy anchors ethics in divine revelation and spiritual formation (10, 11). This divergence raises profound questions about how P4C can be meaningfully adapted without diluting the theological and ethical commitments central to Islamic education.

Islamic educational thought offers a holistic and spiritually grounded vision of learning. Central concepts such as hikmah (wisdom), adab (moral discipline), fitrah (innate disposition), and tazkiyah (spiritual refinement) emphasize that education extends beyond cognitive acquisition to encompass moral, spiritual, and social dimensions (10-12). According to Al-Attas, education in Islam is not merely the transfer of knowledge but the cultivation of the whole person, harmonizing reason, faith, and character (11). Halstead further stresses that the Islamic concept of education integrates ethical formation with intellectual growth, situating learning within a framework of divine purpose (10).

These principles provide a sharp contrast to the secular underpinnings of P4C, which privilege autonomy and relativism. Yet, they also resonate with P4C's emphasis on reasoning, dialogue, and ethical engagement. For instance, the Islamic notion of adab aligns with P4C's call for respectful dialogue in a community of inquiry, while hikmah complements its pursuit of wisdom through critical reflection (12-14). Thus, an integrative framework that harmonizes P4C with Islamic educational values holds the potential to enrich both traditions.

Research indicates that P4C cannot be transplanted wholesale into different cultural settings without adaptation (4, 5). For instance, Czech teachers reported the necessity of contextualizing P4C in ways that reflect national educational traditions and values (4). In Malaysia, the challenge of educational dualism—balancing secular and religious curricula—has highlighted the need for pedagogical models that bridge Western frameworks with Islamic traditions (12). Similarly, efforts in Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrate how Islamic values can be embedded within teaching practices, creating hybrid models that are culturally relevant and spiritually grounded (13, 15).

These case studies underscore the broader challenge of reconciling P4C's secular origins with Islamic educational philosophy. Without such reconciliation, P4C risks being perceived as an external imposition that undermines local epistemologies and moral commitments. As Yusof argues, genuine Islamization of contemporary education requires reconstructing P4C to reflect Islamic perspectives rather than superficially attaching Islamic values to secular frameworks (14).

A growing body of empirical research has examined the effects of P4C in Muslim-majority societies. Studies in Iran, for example, have demonstrated that P4C-inspired pedagogies can enhance moral attitudes when aligned with Qur'anic teachings (16). Abedi et al. identified specific components of P4C within the teachings of Imam Ali (AS), underscoring its compatibility with Islamic intellectual heritage (17). Similarly, Hooshmandi et al. found that P4C methods improved questioning and

reasoning skills among elementary students in Iran, suggesting its potential to foster deeper engagement in science education (18).

Beyond Iran, research has highlighted P4C's psychological and emotional benefits. Kabiri and Vahedi, for instance, reported that a technology-enhanced P4C program reduced rumination and enhanced happiness among orphaned and abused girls (19). Mohammadi et al. found that P4C was effective in improving psychological flexibility in children with separation anxiety disorder, performing comparably to group play therapy with cognitive-behavioral elements (20). These findings suggest that P4C can be a powerful pedagogical tool for addressing psychological and developmental needs in Islamic contexts when thoughtfully adapted.

The intersection of P4C and Islamic education is particularly salient in relation to civic and moral formation. Scholars note that P4C has been instrumental in developing civic awareness and ethical reasoning (7, 9). Yet, in Islamic contexts, civic education must also contend with questions of religious identity, authority, and community belonging. Agbaria highlights how civic issues are taught in Islamic education in Israel, reflecting tensions between religious and democratic commitments (21). Similarly, Sen discusses how authoritarian Islamic nationalism shapes citizenship education, raising questions about whether P4C can serve as a counterbalance by fostering pluralism and critical engagement (22).

Michaud and Gregory advance the argument that P4C can function as a form of spiritual education, bridging the divide between critical reasoning and moral-spiritual growth (6). This position aligns with Islamic educational philosophy, where the cultivation of spirituality and morality is inseparable from intellectual development. Such integration suggests that P4C, when aligned with concepts like hikmah and adab, can provide a framework for nurturing not only critical citizens but also spiritually grounded individuals.

One significant area of convergence between P4C and Islamic educational traditions is the role of narrative. Storytelling has long been recognized as a central pedagogical method in Islamic education, where Qur'anic stories and prophetic traditions convey moral and spiritual lessons (23). In the P4C tradition, children's literature and philosophical stories are employed to spark dialogue and inquiry (15, 24). This shared reliance on narrative underscores a fertile ground for integration, where stories can simultaneously cultivate critical reflection and moral awareness.

Moreover, the integration of Islamic values into teaching practices highlights the potential for P4C to act as a culturally responsive pedagogy. Salleh and Zainal demonstrated that embedding Islamic values in classroom practices not only reinforces spiritual identity but also enhances engagement with philosophical dialogue (13). This dual emphasis on narrative and values suggests that P4C, when Islamically contextualized, can strengthen both cognitive and moral development.

Despite growing empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks for integrating P4C and Islamic educational philosophy remain underdeveloped. Much of the existing literature either superficially "Islamizes" P4C or critiques it without offering constructive alternatives (12, 14). A more robust approach requires rethinking P4C not as a neutral methodology but as a culturally situated pedagogy that must engage deeply with Islamic epistemology and ethics (10, 11).

Such integration would not dilute the transformative potential of P4C but rather expand it. By grounding inquiry in hikmah, dialogue in adab, and identity in fitrah, educators can design P4C practices that resonate with the lived realities of Muslim students. This approach also ensures that P4C remains faithful to its philosophical mission—cultivating thoughtful, ethical, and engaged learners—while respecting the spiritual frameworks that guide Islamic education (16, 17).

In sum, the global diffusion of P4C underscores its promise as a pedagogical innovation, but its effectiveness in Islamic contexts depends on meaningful philosophical integration. Existing studies illustrate that P4C can enhance critical thinking, moral reasoning, and psychological resilience when aligned with Islamic principles (18-20). At the same time, tensions between secular and Islamic epistemologies highlight the need for theoretical frameworks that harmonize inquiry-based learning with

spiritually grounded values (10-12). This study seeks to address that need by proposing a comparative and integrative framework that bridges P4C and Islamic educational thought.

Methods and Materials

This research employs a theoretical and conceptual methodology, drawing on critical reasoning and interpretive strategies to explore the underlying logic of central ideas. Rather than relying on empirical data collection, the study engages with scholarly literature across multiple disciplines to analyze and refine key theoretical constructs. The process centers on understanding how concepts are formed, evolve over time, and interact within larger philosophical or pedagogical frameworks. Through comparative reading and close textual analysis, the research traces patterns, distinctions, and latent assumptions embedded in existing theories. This form of inquiry is particularly suited for unpacking complex or contested concepts, as it allows the researcher to challenge implicit biases, highlight contradictions, and identify spaces for conceptual reconstruction. The methodological stance here is not to validate a fixed model but to expand interpretive depth, generate alternative perspectives, and deepen theoretical clarity through reflective engagement with authoritative sources.

The study integrates several analytical tools, including hermeneutic interpretation, conceptual mapping, and critical synthesis. Hermeneutics offers a lens through which to understand key texts and traditions in their intellectual and historical contexts, enabling a more faithful reading of meaning and intention (Gadamer, 2004). At the same time, conceptual analysis allows the dissection of abstract terms, probing their coherence, scope, and normative implications (Rawls, 1971; Berlin, 1969). By applying a comparative strategy, the research positions different theoretical systems in conversation with one another—highlighting both shared foundations and divergent assumptions. This layered methodology makes it possible to articulate underlying worldviews and philosophical tensions while also surfacing new interpretive possibilities. Rather than aiming for closure or definitive conclusions, the study prioritizes exploration, reflection, and the careful unfolding of ideas as a means to contribute meaningfully to theoretical development in the field.

Given its theoretical nature, this study is shaped by certain inherent limitations. Since it does not involve empirical fieldwork or participant observation, its insights are derived from conceptual interpretation rather than lived data or direct experience. As a result, the conclusions drawn should be viewed as reflective contributions to ongoing scholarly dialogue rather than definitive claims. Moreover, while efforts were made to engage a wide range of relevant literature, access to non-English sources—particularly texts in Arabic and Persian—was occasionally restricted, which may have influenced the breadth of perspectives included. The study also remains limited to philosophical and pedagogical analysis, without testing its findings in practical classroom contexts. From an ethical standpoint, the research maintained a commitment to academic integrity, including proper citation, fair representation of opposing views, and sensitivity toward religious and cultural content. No human subjects were involved, thus exempting it from institutional ethics review, yet the work was guided by scholarly responsibility, transparency, and intellectual respect throughout the writing process.

Findings and Results

The core findings of the theoretical analysis point to several areas of meaningful convergence between the conceptual structures of Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Islamic educational thought. Through a detailed comparison of core values and pedagogical elements, the study identified three major zones of alignment: epistemological reasoning, ethical development, and child-centered engagement. For instance, principles such as *hikmah* (wisdom), *adab* (moral discipline), and *tazkiyah* (spiritual refinement) from Islamic sources mirrored the P4C emphasis on reflective inquiry, community dialogue, and moral imagination. Moral cultivation and character development have become central concerns in educational frameworks, with

recent studies highlighting the value of emulation and ethical modeling (Sanderse, 2024; Henderson, 2022). Within our proposed framework (Figure 1), these insights reinforce the integration of adab and hikmah into P4C's community-based inquiry structures (Kim, 2024).

Notably, both traditions underscore the significance of cultivating the child's reasoning capacities—P4C through philosophical questioning, and Islamic pedagogy through *'aql* (intellect) and *fitrah* (innate disposition). These alignments were mapped across texts from thinkers such as Al-Farabi and Al-Ghazali alongside the foundational P4C writings of Lipman and Haynes, forming a comparative matrix of themes that highlighted consistent patterns across otherwise distinct paradigms.

In addition to these core correspondences, the analysis revealed important nuances and variations that surfaced depending on the emphasis within each tradition. One key observation concerned the nature and function of dialogue: while both frameworks value dialogical engagement, P4C tends to view dialogue as a horizontal, democratic exchange, whereas in Islamic pedagogy, dialogue often carries instructional, spiritual, and ethical dimensions rooted in *ta'lim* (teaching) and *hikmah* (wisdom-sharing). Similarly, the study found that when the comparative lens was focused on ethical reasoning, the models drew closer, but divergence grew stronger when addressing foundational metaphysical assumptions—especially regarding the source and purpose of knowledge. The use of narrative showed a similar pattern: while both traditions use stories, their narrative forms and purposes differ, with Islamic pedagogy relying more on revealed narratives (e.g., Qur'anic or prophetic) as vehicles for moral insight. These outcomes were shaped by carefully defined conceptual boundaries in the model, which treated each tradition on its own terms before comparison.

The model's consistency was also tested for robustness across different conceptual scenarios. Results indicated that the proposed framework remained internally coherent in areas such as moral reasoning, intellectual growth, and collective inquiry. However, limitations became evident when the framework was applied to domains like metaphysics or value relativism. For instance, while both P4C and Islamic thought engage ethical questions, their grounding differs—secular P4C draws on humanistic liberal ideals, whereas Islamic education is grounded in divinely revealed moral absolutes. In comparative scenarios that minimized spiritual foundations or emphasized relativist positions, the framework struggled to sustain alignment. This suggests that while the model performs well under conditions of shared ethical emphasis, it becomes strained when foundational worldviews diverge too sharply. These findings were systematically catalogued and analyzed to delineate where the framework holds and where it encounters conceptual limitations.

Finally, a few unanticipated yet theoretically significant results emerged during the course of the analysis. Among them was the central role of *fitrah*, which—although not a primary focus at the outset—repeatedly appeared as a powerful conceptual counterpart to the P4C image of the child as an autonomous philosophical thinker. Another notable observation was the subtle presence of ethical assumptions embedded in many P4C teaching materials, which—despite their claims to neutrality—often reflected Western liberal moral orientations. Additionally, the study identified practical similarities between Islamic *shura* (consultative deliberation) and the P4C "community of inquiry," though these share different origins and values. These results, while not central to the original framework, were documented in detail for their potential to inform future theoretical development and cross-traditional curriculum design.

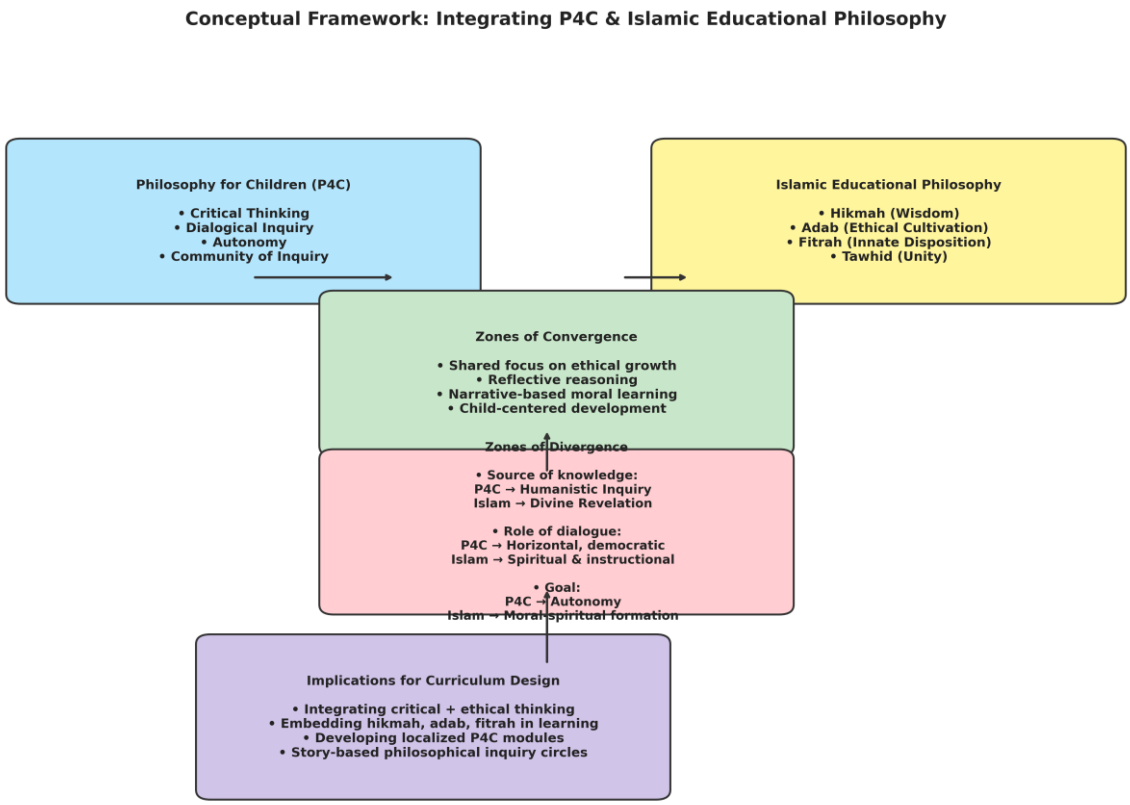

Figure 1. Conceptual framework integrating P4C and Islamic educational philosophy.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework developed in this study, which integrates core principles from Philosophy for Children (P4C) with Islamic educational thought. The framework highlights three major dimensions:

1. The conceptual alignment between P4C and hikmah, adab, and fitrah within Islamic philosophy.

2. Zones of convergence and divergence across ethical, epistemological, and pedagogical dimensions.

3. Practical implications for curriculum design, suggesting ways to develop culturally grounded P4C modules in Islamic learning environments.

This model provides a theoretical foundation for further empirical studies and guides educators in integrating both traditions into effective teaching practices.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that integrating Philosophy for Children (P4C) with Islamic educational philosophy provides a robust framework for cultivating both critical and moral development in learners. The theoretical model demonstrated strong convergence between core concepts of P4C—such as inquiry, dialogue, and critical reasoning—and Islamic values of hikmah (wisdom), adab (moral discipline), and fitrah (innate disposition). These alignments highlight the compatibility of P4C's dialogical pedagogy with the holistic vision of education articulated in Islamic thought (10-12).

This resonates with the empirical findings from Iran, Malaysia, and other Islamic contexts, where adapted P4C models have improved children's moral attitudes, psychological flexibility, and questioning skills (16-20). Moreover, the evidence that P4C can reduce rumination and enhance happiness among vulnerable populations underscores its psychological relevance (19).

These results collectively suggest that P4C, when Islamically contextualized, is not merely an imported pedagogical innovation but a transformative tool that aligns with the ethical and spiritual priorities of Muslim-majority societies.

Our findings align with a growing body of scholarship demonstrating P4C's global adaptability. Studies in European and Asian contexts have shown that teachers and students benefit from philosophical dialogue when it is culturally and contextually grounded (4, 5, 8). The Czech experience with P4C, for example, emphasizes the necessity of contextualizing philosophical inquiry to fit local pedagogical traditions (4). Similarly, Wu's research in China confirmed that P4C can enhance both critical thinking and academic attainment, but only when cultural factors are accounted for (5). These parallels validate the claim that Islamic educational philosophy can provide the cultural grounding necessary to make P4C effective in Muslim societies.

Furthermore, the role of narrative emerged as a vital pedagogical bridge. In Islamic education, storytelling serves as a method of moral instruction and spiritual guidance (23). This aligns closely with P4C's reliance on children's literature and philosophical stories to stimulate inquiry (15, 24). Our results support previous findings that narratives function as catalysts for both critical thinking and ethical reflection, reinforcing the potential for integrated practices that respect both traditions.

The civic and ethical implications of P4C also merit discussion. Studies have shown that P4C enhances civic awareness and ethical reasoning (7, 9). In Islamic contexts, these outcomes are particularly valuable given the ongoing debates around citizenship, democracy, and religious identity. Agbaria's study of civic education in Israel highlighted the tensions between democratic ideals and religious commitments (21), while Sen documented the ways authoritarian Islamic nationalism influences citizenship education (22). Our findings suggest that Islamically integrated P4C may provide a balanced approach, nurturing critical and civic awareness while remaining grounded in spiritual and moral values.

Finally, this study aligns with Michaud's proposition that P4C can function as a form of spiritual education (6). This echoes Islamic perspectives, where intellectual and spiritual growth are inseparable (10, 11). By embedding P4C within Islamic frameworks, educators can simultaneously cultivate rational inquiry and moral-spiritual development, offering a holistic alternative to purely secular approaches.

Beyond affirming existing scholarship, our study contributes a theoretical expansion by explicitly linking P4C to concepts central to Islamic educational philosophy. The integration of hikmah, adab, and fitrah into P4C not only enriches its philosophical depth but also addresses critiques that P4C's secular foundations limit its adaptability in religious settings (12, 14). By grounding inquiry in Islamic epistemology, P4C can transcend its perceived neutrality and gain greater legitimacy in Muslim-majority contexts.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of moral-spiritual formation in education, a concern often overlooked in secular P4C discourse. Scholars such as Lipman and Sharp envisioned P4C as cultivating humanity and democratic participation (1-3), yet their vision was framed within a liberal-humanist paradigm. By contrast, Islamic educational philosophy situates moral and civic development within the framework of divine accountability and spiritual growth (10, 11). The synthesis proposed here therefore extends P4C beyond its original boundaries, aligning it with broader goals of holistic human development.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, it is primarily theoretical and conceptual, relying on literature review and comparative analysis rather than empirical fieldwork. This limits the ability to generalize findings to classroom practice or to evaluate their impact on student learning outcomes. Second, the analysis relied heavily on English-language sources, which may have excluded valuable perspectives from Arabic and Persian scholarship on Islamic education. Third, while the framework demonstrates conceptual convergence, tensions remain around foundational metaphysical assumptions. For example, P4C's emphasis on democratic dialogue may conflict with Islamic education's orientation toward divine revelation and moral absolutes. Finally, the diversity within Islamic traditions themselves—ranging from different

theological schools to cultural practices—means that no single model can represent the entirety of Muslim educational contexts. These limitations highlight the need for caution in interpreting the results as universally applicable.

Future research should build on this theoretical framework through empirical investigation. Classroom-based studies could evaluate how integrated P4C-Islamic models impact student outcomes in areas such as critical thinking, moral reasoning, psychological well-being, and civic awareness. Comparative studies across different Muslim-majority societies—such as Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia—would also provide insights into how cultural variations shape the implementation of integrated models. Longitudinal research could explore how participation in Islamically grounded P4C programs influences students' moral and intellectual development over time. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that draw from psychology, theology, and curriculum studies could enrich the analysis and provide a more holistic understanding. Finally, future work should engage with Islamic primary sources—such as Qur'anic exegesis and classical philosophy—to deepen the theoretical grounding of integration efforts.

Practically, educators should design P4C curricula that incorporate Islamic values without compromising the core principles of philosophical inquiry. This could involve using Qur'anic stories, prophetic traditions, and Islamic philosophical texts as stimulus materials for dialogue. Teacher training programs should equip educators with both philosophical facilitation skills and a deep understanding of Islamic pedagogy. Educational policymakers should support the development of culturally responsive curricula that balance critical inquiry with spiritual and moral objectives. Finally, collaborations between Islamic scholars and P4C practitioners could ensure that integrated models remain both philosophically rigorous and contextually meaningful.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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