

LEARNERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF EMPIRICISM, NATURALISM, NATIVISM, AND CONVERGENCE THEORY: AN ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Research Objectives - This study aims to examine the thoughts of the classical educational schools of thought—empiricism, naturalism, nativism, and convergence—and their relevance to Islamic education in addressing contemporary social and economic challenges.

Method - The approach used is a descriptive qualitative method with a library research design. Data analysis was conducted using a content analysis technique on primary literature (John Locke, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, William Stern, the Qur'an, and Hadith) and secondary literature in the form of academic books and scientific journals.

Research Findings - The findings show that empiricism emphasizes the role of the environment, naturalism prioritizes natural development, nativism highlights hereditary factors, and convergence unites both innate and environmental influences. From the perspective of Islamic education, these four theories are understood as complementing the concept of *fitrah* (innate human nature), which emphasizes spiritual, social, and intellectual balance.

Theory and Practical Implications - Theoretically, this research strengthens the discourse on educational philosophy by offering an integrative framework between Western and Islamic thought. Practically, the study provides a direction for formulating educational policies that are responsive to globalization and sustainable development.

Novelty - The novelty of this study lies in its effort to connect classical educational theories with contemporary economic, social, and spiritual dynamics, thus producing a more relevant and applicable perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of science and technology has significantly influenced educational paradigms, particularly in economic and social contexts. Digital transformation, globalization, and the demands of the labor market necessitate a view of education not merely as a process of knowledge transfer, but as a strategic instrument for shaping the quality of human resources (UNESCO, 2021). In this context, the discourse on educational philosophies becomes increasingly relevant, as each school of thought embodies philosophical, social, and economic values that guide human development as individuals and members of society (Biesta, 2015). This phenomenon underscores the importance of re-examining the contributions of both classical and modern educational philosophies to the quality of education in the contemporary era.

Previous studies have examined classical educational thought from philosophical and historical perspectives (Ozmon & Craver, 2018; Noddings, 2018). However, most of these studies primarily emphasize the theoretical dimension without deeply connecting it to the current socio-economic dynamics. For instance, Biesta's (2015) work predominantly highlights education's role in shaping democratic subjects but provides limited exploration of the political-economic aspects inherent in

these educational philosophies. Consequently, a gap exists in understanding the relationship between educational philosophies and ongoing socio-economic transformations.

Furthermore, previous research has also tended to be fragmented in its discussion of the contributions of individual educational philosophies, such as progressivism, essentialism, and reconstructionism, without considering their integration in addressing global challenges (Noddings, 2018; Dewey, 2012). This critique indicates a need to develop a more integrative conceptual framework, where educational philosophies are viewed not only from a historical standpoint but also in terms of their contributions to solving contemporary issues, such as social inequality, enhancing economic competitiveness, and promoting sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021).

The novelty of this research lies in its effort to connect classical educational philosophies with contemporary economic and social dynamics. While previous studies have focused solely on philosophical and normative aspects, this research offers a new perspective by emphasizing the practical relevance of these philosophies to the needs of human development in a globalized era. Through this approach, the article contributes to enriching the literature on the philosophy of education while bridging the gap between theoretical studies and the practice of socio-economic development.

The purpose of this study is to re-evaluate the ideas of educational philosophies from a philosophical, historical, and relevant perspective in addressing contemporary social and economic challenges. This research is limited to a literature review and therefore does not touch upon empirical aspects, such as curriculum implementation or educational practices in the field. However, this limitation also presents an opportunity for future research to test these conceptual findings within a broader empirical context.

METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research methodology. This approach was chosen because the study's focus lies in the conceptual and historical analysis of educational philosophy theories, specifically Empiricism, Naturalism, Nativism, and Convergence, and their connection to the concept of the learner in Islamic education. A descriptive qualitative approach is widely used in philosophical and educational research due to its ability to delve deeply into the meaning, values, and relevance of theories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Prior research by Hassan (2020) demonstrated that qualitative library studies are effective in connecting classical theories with contemporary Islamic educational perspectives. Therefore, this method is considered most appropriate as it can integrate Western and Islamic literature to address the research focus.

Data collection for this study was conducted through documentation studies, which involves reviewing, quoting, noting, and analyzing various relevant primary and secondary literature. Primary data consists of key works by educational philosophers such as John Locke, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and William Stern, as well as primary sources of Islamic education like the Qur'an, Hadith, and the works of Islamic educational thinkers. Secondary data includes academic journals, articles, theses, dissertations, and related academic books. Documentation studies are a highly suitable data collection technique for library research, as they allow researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding from multiple sources (Bowen, 2009). Furthermore, contemporary literature was also considered to ensure the relevance of the analysis findings to the current educational context (Snyder, 2019).

The collected data were analyzed using content analysis. This analysis was carried out through three main stages: (1) data reduction, which involves selecting relevant information from the literature; (2) data display, by organizing the data into a thematic description aligned with philosophical theories and Islamic educational perspectives; and (3) conclusion drawing, which entails interpreting the views of classical theories and linking them to the concept of the learner in Islam. To maintain data validity, source triangulation was employed, comparing various different literature sources to obtain an objective and comprehensive understanding. This technique strengthens the validity of the research findings by minimizing interpretative bias (Patton, 2015). The research analysis framework is shown in Figure 1.

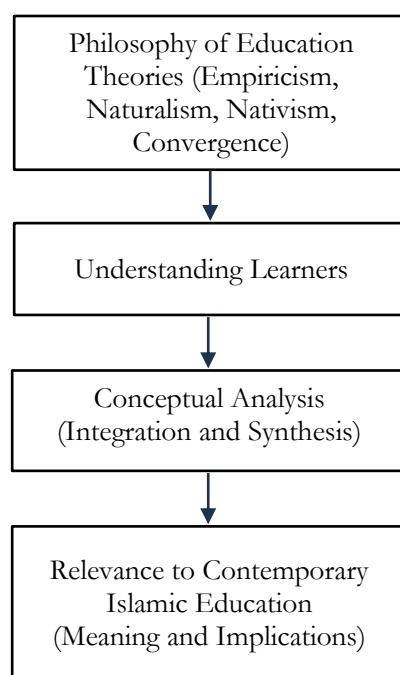


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Philosophical Review of Educational Theories: Empiricism, Naturalism, Nativism, and Convergence. The philosophical discourse on the development of learners is deeply rooted in a long-standing debate concerning the respective roles of innate factors, environment, and their combination in shaping human personality. Major theories such as empiricism, naturalism, nativism, and convergence have emerged to address the fundamental question of how humans develop, learn, and are educated according to their inherent nature. These theories not only reflect the philosophical views of their proponents but also influence the direction of educational practice across various eras, including Islamic education, which emphasizes a balance between *fitrah*, experience, and guidance. By understanding these four schools of thought, educators can gain a more comprehensive insight into the dynamics of learner development and can better adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs, potential, and developmental conditions of children.

The first of these is the theory of empiricism. Its key figure is John Locke, an English philosopher who lived from 1632 to 1704. His theory is known for the concept of *Tabula rasa*, a Latin term meaning "blank slate" or "blank tablet," which posits that a child is born into the world as a clean, empty slate. John Locke argued that a child's development into an adult is entirely determined by their environment, or by the education and experiences they receive from an early age. He believed that human beings can be molded into anything, whether good or bad, according to the will of their environment or education. In this view, the environment is the sole formative agent. Within educational theory, this empiricist perspective is known as pedagogical optimism.

According to this theory, innate factors from parents (hereditary factors) are considered insignificant. A child's experience is acquired through their interactions with the social, natural, and cultural environment. The influence of these empirical experiences plays a profound role in a child's development across cognitive, emotional, social, and moral domains. From this perspective, the educator, as an external factor, holds a crucial role, as they are responsible for providing the educational environment for the child. The child receives this education as an experience, which subsequently shapes their behavior, attitudes, and character in line with the desired educational goals. Empiricism asserts that innate characteristics are non-existent; what a child possesses is a direct result of education. Both positive and negative traits are consequently determined by the environment and

the education and experiences a child receives from a young age, enabling humans to become whatever their environment or educators intend them to be.

Arifin posits two key aspects that can influence an individual's social development. (1) biological aspects, which include nourishment and various activities that contribute to a person's physical maturation. (2) personal aspects, which refer to experiences and the influence of others that can shape an individual into a responsible person.

Second, the theory of Naturalism posits that all children are born with an inherently good disposition, with none possessing an evil one. It holds that every child is naturally good at birth, and evil is not innate but rather a product of negative environmental influences. The educational process, therefore, should not force children into rigid patterns but instead provide space for their natural development. Children learn through direct experience and interaction with their environment, and their subsequent development is significantly determined by the education and influences they receive.

The naturalist perspective minimizes the importance of formal education, arguing that educators should allow a child's growth to be guided by nature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a prominent proponent, fervently advocated for a "return to nature" (*back to nature*), urging that children be shielded from the artificialities and vices of society so that their innate goodness can emerge spontaneously and freely.

Naturalism operates on the principle that learners acquire knowledge through their own experiences, which involves an interaction between these experiences and their innate capacities for growth and development. The educator's role is merely to provide a nurturing learning environment. As a facilitator or resource person, the educator creates a setting that encourages students to develop a positive outlook and be receptive to guidance and suggestions. The ultimate responsibility for learning rests with the student. School programs should be tailored to students' interests and talents by providing a learning environment oriented toward their individual learning patterns.

Third, the theory of Nativism posits that human development is predetermined by factors inherent at birth. These innate characteristics are believed to be the sole determinant of developmental outcomes. This school of thought asserts that education cannot alter these innate traits, as individual development is fundamentally governed by heredity. Nativism therefore holds that human development is solely determined by innate predisposition, with experience and education having no influence. In the field of education, this view is known as "pedagogical pessimism." Within the individual, there is a core personal essence that drives self-actualization, empowers personal choice and will, and establishes the individual as an active being with free will. From the perspective of the philosophy of education, nativism is viewed as a theory that describes development without environmental influence, emphasizing a naturally occurring progression driven by genetic factors. In simple terms, the nativist view stresses that a learner's developmental outcome is determined by factors present at birth, prioritizing what is naturally given over the influence of education or the environment.

Fourth, the theory of Convergence posits that a child is born with both good and bad innate talents, while their subsequent development is influenced by the environment. This theory therefore considers both innate and environmental factors to be influential.

According to the convergence theory, there are three principles: (1) education is intended to be implemented as action; (2) education is understood as assistance provided by the environment to learners in order to foster the development of positive potential and to prevent the emergence of less desirable potential; and (3) the outcomes of education are limited by both innate disposition and environmental factors.

Factors Influencing Learner Development. Regarding the factors that influence the development of learners, scholars hold different views depending on their perspectives and approaches toward the existence of learners. The first perspective is empiricism, represented by John Locke, an English philosopher who lived from 1632 to 1704. His theory, known as *Tabula Rasa* (wax tablet), literally means a blank slate. He argued that the human mind is empty at birth and only acquires content once the senses begin to perceive objects, which are then transmitted through the nerves into consciousness, that is, the soul. According to this school of thought, the educator, as an external factor, plays a crucial role because the

educator provides the child's educational environment, through which the child receives experiences as a form of education. These experiences shape the child's behavior, attitudes, and character in accordance with the objectives of education.

The second perspective is naturalism, pioneered by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued that all children are essentially good at birth as they come from the hands of the Creator, but are eventually corrupted by human influence. For this reason, Rousseau developed the concept of natural education, meaning that children should be allowed to grow and develop according to their natural tendencies. Education should be cultivated within democratic social frameworks so that the natural inclinations of individuals may be realized, thereby ensuring that their inherent goodness is not diminished. Children should not be regarded merely as miniature adults, but as individuals undergoing their own stages of development that must be nurtured naturally. For example, in childhood, the development of the senses should occur through the child's own activities, which serve to guide their behavior. During adolescence, religion and morality should be introduced only in a natural context, while intellectual capacity should be fostered and imagination not excessively constrained. Instruction aimed at instilling rigid rules or authority should be postponed.

The third perspective is nativism, represented by the German philosopher Schopenhauer, who lived from 1788 to 1880. Nativism holds that individual development is determined by innate factors present at birth. This school of thought, often described as pessimistic for its tendency to interpret life through a negative lens, asserts that human destiny is determined by inherent dispositions. Accordingly, learning outcomes are determined by inborn talents: if a child is born with an evil disposition, they will grow to be evil; conversely, if born with a good disposition, they will grow to be good. Education that does not align with a child's innate talents will be of little use for their development. This view aligns with certain realities, such as children resembling their parents physically and inheriting their traits and abilities. The fundamental principle of nativism is the recognition of natural capacities that are present from birth, including psychological and physiological faculties, as well as hereditary abilities, each of which develops to varying extents. Some may reach their maximum potential, while others may not progress beyond a certain limit. For instance, a child may become a musician surpassing the abilities of their parents, or they may only reach half of their parents' capacity.

The fourth perspective is convergence, represented by William Stern, a German educator who lived from 1871 to 1939. Convergence theory constitutes a compromise or combination of nativism and empiricism, arguing that children are born with both positive and negative dispositions, while their development is also influenced by the environment. Both innate factors and environmental conditions play equally important roles. A child who possesses good innate qualities and is supported by a positive educational environment will develop into a better individual. Conversely, innate talents will not flourish without the support of an appropriate environment. Thus, the combination of good dispositions and a supportive educational environment is essential for child development. By creating a nurturing environment, children can be assisted not only in developing their talents but also in becoming individuals who contribute positively to society.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that classical educational philosophies such as empiricism, naturalism, nativism, and convergence retain significant relevance in addressing contemporary educational challenges, particularly from the perspective of Islamic education. The analysis reveals that empiricism emphasizes the importance of experience and environment, naturalism underscores the freedom of natural development, nativism highlights the dominance of innate factors, while convergence seeks to synthesize both in a balanced manner. When integrated with the values of Islamic education, these ideas show that learners are understood not merely as objects of education but as subjects with an innate potential (*fitrah*) that requires integral development. Consequently, this study addresses the core question of how classical educational philosophies can contribute to understanding learners and their relevance to current socio-economic needs and global challenges.

In comparison with previous studies (e.g., Ozmon & Craver, 2018; Noddings, 2018; Biesta, 2015) that tended to focus exclusively on philosophical and normative examinations, this research

introduces novelty by linking classical thought with contemporary economic, social, and spiritual dynamics. While prior research emphasized the democratic aspects of education (Biesta, 2015) or historical and theoretical dimensions (Noddings, 2018), this study offers an integrative framework that connects Western literature with the rich tradition of Islamic education. The novelty of this research lies in its effort to link classical theories with pressing issues such as digital transformation, social inequality, and sustainable development, while simultaneously providing an opportunity for future empirical research to test the contributions of these concepts in real educational practice. Thus, this study enriches the literature of educational philosophy by positioning classical educational philosophies as a dynamic and relevant conceptual foundation for confronting the global challenges of the 21st century.

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