Whole Child Education, in our current time and context, holds the potential to mitigate fragmentation in economic, social, cultural, and personal contexts (Miller, 1988, p. 4). In spite of material wealth, many people today feel disconnected from spirituality, lacking a sense of awe, a connection to nature, or reverence for life. There are several educational frameworks, for example, Waldorf Schools (Carlgren, Rudel, & Rudell, 1976; Stacey, 1997), Montessori Education (Lillard, 1996) and Roots of Empathy in Canada (Gordon, 2005) that practice whole teaching approaches. These frameworks aim for connectedness by moving away from fragmented approaches to education and life, thereby facilitating connectedness in every sphere of learning (Miller, 2010). Education with a holistic perspective, leads to the development of creative and critical thinkers who experience connection both within themselves and with the world at large (Miller, 2010, p. 57).

The Madrasa schools in East Africa represent an early learning model rooted in a revitalised and reconceptualised understanding of the traditional madrasa framework in Islam. The Madrasa schools have changed from the colonial schools, having been turned into modern learning environments (Munir & Nanji, 2002, p. 235), as well as affirming local spaces and institutions. The Madrasa schools in East Africa embody a model of holistic learning for early years through an integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum, specifically designed for Muslim children (Panjwani, 2017). In this chapter, we describe Madrasa education in East Africa, not only because Madrasa schools promote holistic teaching and learning, but because the schools also serve as a developmental model for education in certain parts of the world, where access to education is a challenge. This particular example of holistic education offers learning to some of the poorest and most marginalised communities in the world. The goals of the Madrasa program are to increase students’ access to, and retention in, primary school by improving their well-being through a child-friendly, supportive environment.

This chapter presents a conceptual framework, based on principles of Islam (Figure 21.1). It details an approach to holistic education rooted in Islamic spirituality (Panjwani, 2008), and connects this with Miller’s framework of holistic education, which builds on a synthesis of many perspectives from around the world. The case of Madrasa Schools in East Africa and Madrasa Resource Centers (MRCs) demonstrates a blend of the two holistic frameworks: that of Miller (1988, 2010) and that of Islam. We begin by drawing a brief review of Miller’s Whole Child Education and Holistic Curriculum perspectives (1988; 2010). This is followed by the corresponding understanding of the principles and values underlying Whole Child Education from an Islamic worldview. The latter is explored through a description of spirituality in Islam and a framework of ethical underpinnings that inform...
Holistic Education

Whole Child Education, according to Gandhi (1958) develops mind, body, and spirit in an integrated manner. It is based on the belief that each human being is endowed with a divine spark, or soul, that has life-nourishing energy. Maria Montessori’s educational vision consists of cosmic education that nurtures children’s sense of meaning and purpose in their lives through reading stories from different traditions. The wholeness, mentioned by Gandhi, can be achieved through understanding and engagement with whole teaching. According to Miller (2010), one of the ways of practicing whole teaching is through a combination of three approaches to teaching: transmission, transaction, and transformation. Holistic education is rooted in balance, inclusion, and connection. It integrates multiple spheres of learning, namely the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and aesthetic, while also paying heed to the spiritual dimension (Miller, 2005). Engagement of the student as a whole, and the balance of the rational and the intuitive, are pillars of holistic learning.

The Whole Curriculum

Holistic education implies a Whole Curriculum that connects with the child. It is centered on relationships and an understanding of the interdependence of human life, society, and nature. Miller (2010, p. 60) examines six types of connections to support integrated learning: those of subject, community, earth, body–mind, thinking, and soul. Integrated curriculum focuses on personal and social issues (Beane, 1997). An ethic of love, as described by bell hooks (2001) is a pivotal value in the whole school and Whole Curriculum. hooks links love to spirituality, maintaining that love is our true destiny (Miller, 2010, p. 83). Different types of love, like eros and philia, are necessary to build a whole school community. The leadership of whole school community mitigates divisions in the school through love (Miller, 2010, p. 90).

Islamic Worldview and Spirituality in Islam

In Islam, spirituality is considered a state of mind that perceives life beyond its temporal/worldly nature and connects all of humanity with its divine origin. The religious belief system in Islam is
harmonious with nature. Muslims perceive nature and Allah’s creation as the first revelation, even before the initiation of divine revelations (Nasr, 2002, p. 12). Spirituality in Islam is a universal, holistic, all-pervading, benevolent, humanitarian spark, which enlightens the paths of humanity and is divinely guided (Panjwani, 2008).

**Ethical Framework of Islam**

The *Madrasa* schools are guided by the mandate of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), which is derived from an ethical framework of Islam (The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004). Operating through this framework, the Aga Khan Development Network represents a contemporary endeavor of the Ismaili Imamat to realize the social conscience of Islam through institutional action.

**The Ismaili Imamat**

The message of Islam as revealed to Prophet Muhammad calls upon people to seek signs that point to the Creator and Sustainer of all creation in their daily life, to see the rhythm of nature and the order of the universe, in their own selves. While this requires worship of, and obedience to, God, it also suggests human responsibility towards God’s creation, including nourishing the soul, not abusing the body, and refraining from indulging in excesses that create pain and diversion from God. Historically, the responses to these central messages of Islam have been expressed through two main perspectives within Islam: the Shia and the Sunni. The Ismailis are the second largest Shia Muslim community (Daftary, 1990). The leader of the Ismaili community is His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, also known as the Aga Khan IV, the 49th hereditary Imam of the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims. According to the Aga Khan: “The Ismaili Imamat is a supra-national entity representing the succession of Imams since the time of the Prophet” (His Highness the Aga Khan, 2014).

**The Ismaili Worldview**

The Ismaili worldview constitutes a historically grounded perspective within the wider tapestry of Islamic worldviews (Panjwani, 2008). The Ismailis believe in a vertical relationship with God that is bi-directional. From Allah to humankind, this relationship is in the form of divine guidance received through the revelations to Prophet Muhammad. This guidance continued through Ismaili Imams, who are divinely guided to interpret the revelations with changing times and contexts. Muslims reciprocate their relationships with God, the Prophet, and those in authority through prayers, supplication, good deeds, and leading a life based on the Islamic tradition of ethical principles. Besides the vertical relationship, a horizontal link also exists with the divine in the form of human relationships and, finally, humankind’s relationship with nature (Mitha, July 2006). Understanding of this framework is foundational to Ismailis’ daily actions and decision making. This vision (Figure 21.1) not only links the human with the divine and human beings with each other, but also positions every action within a divinely guided ethical framework.

**Aga Khan Development Network**

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a network of private, non-denominational development agencies founded by the Aga Khan, which work primarily in the poorest parts of Asia and Africa. His Highness, the Aga Khan IV is the founder of the AKDN. He became the 49th hereditary Imam as spiritual leader of the Shia Ismaili Muslims in 1957. The network focuses on health, education, culture, rural development, institution building, and the promotion of economic development. The AKDN aims to improve living conditions and opportunities for the poor, without regard to their faith, origin, or gender. AKDN’s annual budget for not-for-profit activities is
approximately $600 million US—mainly for use in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The AKDN works in 30 countries around the world, and it employs over 80,000 paid staff, mostly in developing countries. While the agencies are secular, they are guided by Islamic ethics, which bridge faith and society (Aga Khan Development Network, n.d.). The institutions of the Network derive their impetus from the ethics of Islam, which bridge the two realms of the faith: din and duniya. Din is the spiritual/religious and duniya symbolizes the material and worldly. Islam’s ethical ideal is the enablement of each person to live up to his exalted status as vicegerent of God on earth, in whom God has breathed His own spirit and to whom He has made whatever is in the heavens and the earth, an object of trust and quest.

(The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004, p. 1)

In this way, duniya is not a distraction leading the humans away from the true purpose of life, but a reminder that service to God is not only worship, but also service to humanity and the rest of creation. According to the Quran, righteousness is not only fulfilling one’s religious obligations. It is also accepting social responsibility. Without the latter, religiosity can become a show of conceit. Thus, in Islam, both din (spirit) and duniya (matter) are distinct but intertwined. Each of these aspects is critically important and neither are to be abandoned (The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004). In this way, Islam elevates the sense of public and social order to a transcendent level inspired by a spiritual, universal ethic of eliciting the noble (ihsan) that is inherent in each person. Islam’s ethical ideals that inform the AKDN mandate are: Inclusiveness, Education, and Research, Compassion and Sharing, Self-Reliance, Respect for Life and Health Care, Sound Mind, Sustainable Environment—Physical, Social, and Cultural, and Governance. These ethical principles speak of the wholeness of humanity and the unity of the human race that is born from a single soul (Aga Khan, 2014). The Quran says: “Oh Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women…” (4:1). In other words, this Islamic paradigm matches with the framework of Holistic Education premised on balance, inclusion, and connection. The relationship between din and duniya is akin to the presence of yin and yang in Chinese philosophy (Miller, 1988, p. 6), which are entwined with each other, providing inspiration and balance for living a holistic life.

The Madrasa Schools in East Africa

History and Tradition of Madrasa Education in Islam

Education has been vital in Islam since the time of its birth and has enjoyed a special status among Muslims. Prophet Muhammad laid great importance on learning and initiated the first school, called kuttab, during his lifetime. A famous hadith attributed to the Prophet calls upon Muslims to seek knowledge from cradle to grave, even if a person has to travel to far places, for example, China. Muslim communities around the world consider acquiring and sharing knowledge as important duties. Madrasas, meaning places of learning, also known by other names such as hawza, maktab, kuttab, and jamia (Sakurai & Adelkhah, 2011) are part of this tradition, belief, and practice of Muslims’ commitment to learning. The term madrasa derives its root from Arabic darasa, meaning ‘to study’ (Noor, Sikand, & Bruinessen, 2008). Since pursuit of knowledge is an important aspect of faith for Muslims, the original schools or learning centers were part of Masjids, or places of worship. Contrary to a common misunderstanding, madrasas do not merely impart religious education, they also teach other subjects, providing both religious/ethical and secular/professional education to students. In the modern-day context, these traditional places of learning have come under attack and suspicion.
for various reasons related to Islamic extremism (Noor et al., 2008, p. 9). While for some schools this perception might hold true, most of the madrasas do not fit into the generalized image created through the media (Park & Niyozov, 2008).

The Madrasa Early Childhood Program (MECP)

The Madrasa Early Childhood Development Program is an AKDN initiative to establish community-owned and managed preschools for disadvantaged Muslim communities in Mombasa (Kenya), Kampala (Uganda), and Zanzibar (Tanzania). It is a unique program systematically focused on Muslim identity development. In 1982, the leaders of the Muslim community in East Africa, along with representatives of the Aga Khan Foundation, met with His Highness the Aga Khan in Mombasa to address the educational needs of the Muslim community. Distress was expressed about the severe marginalization of Muslim children due to lack of access to primary schooling, which affected their future prospects (Aga Khan Foundation, 2008). A series of meetings spearheaded by the Aga Khan resulted in what is now the Madrasa project, emerging from a deep concern for acquiring and sharing knowledge in accordance with Islamic tradition. This creative vision guiding the Madrasa project aims to “… prepare young children for life itself – in all of its holistic dimensions” (Aga Khan, 2007, August 14).

A retired teacher, Bi Swafiya Said, initiated this educational model in 1986 as the first director, through a grant from the Aga Khan Foundation. She came from a family with a tradition of service to Muslim educational causes. Thus, she was able to convince the local community to broaden the reach of madrasa beyond religious teaching. She was also able to mobilize young Muslim women to come forward for training, as well as create resource centers promoting best practices drawn from international early childhood learning models.

For more than three decades now, the Madrasa project has been running successfully in a variety of East African contexts. Today, there are 203 preschools in East Africa under the Madrasa Program, serving over 54,000 students (Rashid, 2010). The Madrasa project operates under the Madrasa Resource Centers (MRCs) in the three countries. The Resource Centers assist marginalized communities to set up early childhood centers in the areas of need. The mandate of MRC also includes developing training methodologies, teaching programs, and manuals (Ismailimail, 2015). The Madrasa project is now a major educational movement in East Africa, joined by several other madrasas and community endeavors (Early Childhood Development Program, May 13, 2013). With the popularity and expansion of the program, other faith communities have also joined this educational venture, giving it a rich pluralist inclusivity. Local languages like Luganda in Uganda, and Swahili in Mombasa and Zanzibar are used as the medium of instruction. The program fosters “children’s sense of cultural and religious identity” (Munir & Nanji, 2002, p. 234), through a balanced curriculum, resulting in a ‘reimagining’ of Muslim childhood. It utilizes child-centered pedagogy in learning, along with traditional forms of teaching such as reading and writing (Jaffer, 2009). The curriculum draws from global educational best practices, is modified to be culturally appropriate, and incorporates Islamic teaching and practices (Faizi, 2014). What Miller describes as ‘Whole Curriculum’ is termed as ‘education for life’ by the Madrasa project. It nurtures the children’s religious and cultural identity while also ensuring that the ethical values drawn from Quranic education are not compromised.

The Kenyan Madrasa curriculum seeks to address and harmonize all three major spheres that influence the identity formation of Muslim children in Kenya: Islam, the tradition of Swahili culture, and the emergent values of the modern nation state of Kenya (Munir & Nanji, 2002, p. 234). It encompasses the wholeness of the spiritual vision of Islam integrated with community values and a national vision. The integration of religious formation and the learning of relevant skills are premised on a transformative-reproductive approach to teaching that enables these students to develop
the skills, knowledge, and values while remaining Muslims, true to their faith. This transformative teaching is infused with religion and nurturing wisdom, compassion, and sense of purpose in one’s life. Their Muslim faith is interpreted in terms of tolerance for each other and connecting the Muslim community with global humanity (Senge, Sharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005, p. 188, as quoted in Miller, 2010, p. 29). The connectedness between the outer world and inner world of lived experiences at a micro level, and the connectedness among people in the larger world, defines organic wholeness. The program also establishes linkages between preschool and local primary school teachers to ease children’s transitions to primary schooling. Such a holistic approach ensures the non-compartmentalized development of a child, thus making the Madrasa a uniquely holistic model of education. The curriculum of the Madrasa project aims to cover six connections: community, earth, inner/soul, body–mind, subject, and intuition/inquiry at early learning and elementary levels. The Madrasa uses traditional spaces of learning, which help preserve the religious and cultural identity of the Muslim children.

Innovative approaches to the curriculum are utilized in the program. As Munir and Nanji (2002) write:

> Learning aids are developed out of local, low-cost materials such as sea-shells, seedpods, and coconuts. The curriculum includes Swahili stories and motifs from local culture as well as English, numeracy, and other interactive, child-centered forms of learning. Thus, the whole range of cosmopolitan learning – Muslim, local, and international – has found a place in the developing curriculum to inform the children’s sense of self and preparation for the changing environment in which they will have to compete and function.

(Munir & Nanji, 2002, p. 234)

The Madrasa education model promotes the view that cultural resources can be effectively used for educational, child, and community development. It is driven by local cultural values combined with Islamic religious and spiritual ideals. All these traits are successfully amalgamated within a secular educational setting, which makes it unique. The Madrasas also offer solutions for contemporary development challenges by developing human and material resources. As a visiting Canadian educator to a Madrasa school in Uganda observed:

> The teaching pedagogy in a Madrasa school can be compared with a preschool classroom in Canada. Having taught kindergarten in the Peel Board of Education in Ontario, I had fun immersing myself with the children at the various learning areas set up in each of the schools: a block area, book area, sand and water area, and shop and home areas.

(Murji, 2014, para. 8)

The Community Connection: The Beloved Community and the Ummah

A caring community within and outside of the classroom is one of the essential tenets of nurturing the whole child. Miller (2010) cites Martin Luther King Jr.’s notion of The Beloved Community, which is a place of love and justice, to emphasize the role of community in developing the whole child. The Beloved Community is a human society based on interrelatedness, belonging, and inclusivity. King (as cited in Miller, 2010) maintains that each person is indebted to others for survival and for the existence of society. Thus, injustice done to one person is an injustice to all human beings. King’s vision of The Beloved Community is inclusive of all races, classes, ethnic groups, nations, and religions (Miller, 2010). The whole school represents such a community, where teachers and students feel at home and look forward to being there. The leadership in such whole school communities plays a critical role in creating an enabling environment and actualizing the vision of The
Beloved Community. Miller (2010, p. 90) describes principles to be followed by the principal in building the Beloved Community: organic vision and focused plans with an understanding that change is not linear and that non-verbal dimensions are important. As Miller (1988) writes:

The focus of holistic education is on relationships: the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships amongst various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and our relationship to our souls.

(p. 13)

The Quran enjoins a similar dictum signifying the connectedness between the common humanity:

For that cause We decreed for the Children of Israel that whosoever killeth a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoso saveth the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.

(5:32)

The understanding of community in Islam has underpinnings similar to the Beloved Community of King. It is called *Ummah*. *Ummah* in Arabic means ‘nation’, ‘community’, or ‘the people’, denoting the collective community of Muslim peoples. The term is commonly used in Muslim countries to differentiate universal brotherhood of all men and women, as well as specific brotherhood shared by the commonality of the faith of Islam. For example, in the community of Medina at the time of Prophet, *Ummah* is believed to have included Jews, Christians, and Sabians (The *Quran*, 2:62). *The Charter of Medina*, drawn by Prophet Muhammad, also indicated this inclusive understanding (Firestone, 1999, p. 18; Serjeant, 1964; Watt, 1956).

In Islam, the interrelationship between God, individual, and human society can be presented graphically through a series of concentric circles (Nasr, 2002). The innermost circle stands for the relationship between an individual and God, followed by the circles of the family, the city or town where one lives, the nation, the Islamic community (*Ummah*), the entire humanity, and, finally, creation as a whole. Each circle has its center in the first circle, and all interactions in subsequent circles are based on the relationship between the individual and God. In conjunction with these interrelationships, there is a set of responsibilities each person is supposed to perform, starting with one’s own self, followed by her/his duty towards the society and family. The individualistic Western perspective regarding the human body as entirely one’s own and at one’s disposal is not part of the Islamic belief system. Men and women in Islam are guided in personal morality by their faith, but Islam also envisions a social order that holds each person accountable through morally just conduct towards others. The foundation of Muslim *ummah* was drawn by Prophet Muhammad by the suffusion of daily life with religious morality and spirituality, which is a reminder of *din–dunya* balance described above. Further, in the traditional Islamic worldview, every necessity of life, including earning one’s daily bread, is sanctified (Nasr, 2002).

Today, when technology and excessive materialism are diluting human connectedness, the *Madrasa* model presents the power of community endeavors in creating change and forging meaningful human relationships. It affirms *ubuntu*, a traditional African communal ethic of love that goes beyond the love of the family to include the tribe and humanity as a whole (Miller, 2010, p. 84). *Madrasa* schools are an integrated part of the community. The program’s integrated dimensions of community values and national vision symbolize wholeness of the community (Miller, 2000), whereby people are able to relate to one another openly. Such community connections foster a sense of care. In these ways, the *Madrasa* schools embody relationship with faith, self, country, and earth.
Community empowerment and school-community connection are manifested in the ways in which community members come forward in constructing, raising funds, and managing the Madrasa schools. The development of community literacy enhances engagement of the community members with the program. Parents’ literacy is also heightened as they learn from their children and participate in various school programs. The inclusive spirit can be witnessed from the participation of the members of the community and the girls having equal opportunity for education. These poor communities have the richness of unity, a spirit of sharing, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, and helping each other. These values help the community members harness resources and capacity. The shared values of these communities are an embodiment of community empowerment that has created a sense of pride, and empowerment, which will have a long-term impact on its education and development. The ethic of education and research in Islam inspires individuals to be lifelong learners with the realization that the journey to becoming whole human being is continuous. Seeking knowledge is getting closer to God. These ethics collectively lead the Madrasa teachers towards becoming Whole Teachers practicing, patience, presence, care, love, and humility.

Conclusion

The Madrasa project in East Africa, presents a faith–based model of holistic education. Holistic education as understood and practiced in the Madrasa model is an effort towards the vision of educating the whole child. As Miller (2010) writes:

Educating the whole child needs whole teaching, a whole curriculum, whole schools, and whole teachers. Although whole child education challenges administrators and teachers, it can help create schools where students enjoy being and learning. The aim of the whole child education is the development of children and adolescents who can think, feel, and act and whose bodies and souls are nourished.

(p. 13)

In providing education that involves parents, communities, and children, the Madrasa schools are civil societies that bring about change through community empowerment. They nullify the criticisms heaped on madrasas that we hear today. Instead, these schools enable Muslim children to thrive in a pluralistic and globalizing world, while nurturing their moral, spiritual, and cultural identity. The Madrasa schools offer development that is relevant to young children’s local context. Together with an emphasis on continuous connection of the child with the indigenous ways of knowing, the Madrasas have the capacity to inspire different whole schools and faith communities to explore resources from their own sacred texts, religious values, and diverse histories in the process of developing whole children that are confident with their religious and cultural identities.

Significantly, these madrasas challenge the negative perceptions about madrasa, Islamic education, and Islam as a whole. They produce children who care for all beings and do not have to abandon their language, tradition, and culture to become cosmopolitans. They are empowered to transform these dimensions of their identity constructively and inclusively.

Note

1 Framework describing Islamic as well as Ismaili worldview from a presentation entitled “Authority and Community” given by Farouk Mitha at the International Human Resource Training programme in July 2006, London, UK.
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