

Educational Integration of Persons with Disabilities in Early Islamic Society: A Historical and Analytical Study

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Abstract

This study explores the Islamic perspective on the education and social inclusion of persons with disabilities (khusūsi'āfrad) by examining historical evidence from the prophetic era and early Islamic society. Contrary to modern assumptions that disability historically resulted in exclusion, Islamic teachings, derived from the Qur'an, Sunnah, and early Muslim practice, establish a framework of dignity, capability, and social participation for individuals with disabilities. The research highlights how the Prophet ﷺ provided ta'lim wa tarbiyah (education and moral training) to persons with disabilities and entrusted them with key responsibilities in society. Prominent examples such as 'Abdullāh ibn Umm Maktūm, who served as a mu'adhdhin and teacher; 'Itbān ibn Mālik, who led congregational prayers despite blindness; and eminent scholars like 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās, whose blindness did not hinder his scholarly contributions, demonstrate Islam's practical approach to empowerment rather than exclusion. These historical precedents reveal that early Muslims adopted an inclusive educational model based on ability, piety, and service, rather than physical perfection. Through textual and historical analysis, this paper argues that Islamic civilization laid the foundations for an equitable educational philosophy long before the emergence of modern concepts of special education. The findings affirm that integrating persons with disabilities is not only a social need but an Islamic obligation rooted in Qur'anic principles of justice, mercy, and human dignity.

Keywords: Educational Integration, Persons With Disabilities, Early Islamic Society, Historical Perspective, Inclusion

Introduction

Allah Almighty created human beings in the best form and bestowed upon them the noble title of Ashraf al-Makhlūqāt (the most honored of creation). However, at times, due to congenital conditions, illness, or an accident, some individuals are deprived of certain physical blessings granted by Allah and may suffer from mental or physical disability. Because of this, they face difficulty in performing daily life activities, and their social needs also differ from those of other people. Therefore, if a person is deprived of any blessing either by birth or due to an illness or accident, he should seek help from Allah Almighty and should not despair of His mercy. The Sharī'ah has also granted many concessions (rukḥṣat) for persons with disabilities. A study of Islamic history reveals that both the Qur'ān and Aḥādīth emphasize strongly the education, training, and social rights of such special persons (khusūṣī afrad). However, in the present era, if we observe society, we find that not enough attention is paid to providing proper education and training to persons with disabilities, although they should be enabled to become responsible citizens.

Many commands and guidelines regarding this matter are found in the Qur'ān and Aḥādīth, yet this article specifically discusses the need and importance of the education and training of persons with disabilities in society, why their education and character-building are necessary. It will also shed light on various practical measures through which their education and upbringing may be ensured, and it will highlight the responsibilities of society in enabling persons with disabilities to become useful and productive citizens through education and training. Below, the meaning and concept of disability (ma'dhūriyat) and education and training will be explained, along with their importance in the light of the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth.

1. Disability (Meaning and Concept)

Disability is a broad and comprehensive term. It includes physical and medical impairments as well as psychological and emotional limitations. The word ma'dhūrī is derived from the Arabic language, from the root letters 'Ayn, Zāy, Rā' and it is an ism maf'ūl (passive participle) from Bāb If'āl. It means "a person having an excuse," that is, one who has a medical or physical restriction or suffers from any condition. In Arabic lexicography, this term does not apply only to physical defects or disabilities; rather, the word in its linguistic sense carries a wide and general meaning. Travel, illness, disability, and women's physical conditions are all included in the concept of disability (UK Parliament, 1995).

In the global context, a practical definition of disability is presented in British Law (for persons with disabilities):

"A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (Thomas, 1978).

According to the WHO (World Health Organization):

"A disability is the loss of function due to impairment (The Qur'an, Surah Al-Qiyamah, 71:45).

David Thomas defines disability as:

"Disability refers to the impact of impairment upon the performance of activities commonly accepted as the basic elements of everyday living (The Qur'an, Surah An-Nisa, 4:145).

In light of the above definitions, it may be said that disability is a very broad term. It may include both physical and mental impairments. Disability affects a person's daily life; due to disability, a person may either completely lose the ability to work or be partially affected,

depending on the nature of the disability.

The Real Nature of Disability

Qur'anic and Prophetic Guidance on Disability:

The Qur'an uses several meaningful and elegant expressions to refer to people with disabilities, indicating their social and moral status with dignity rather than humiliation. The following Qur'anic terms are used in reference to such individuals:

(i) Ulū al-Ḍarar

Allah says:

لَا يَسْتَوِي الْقَاعِدُونَ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ غَيْرُ أُولَى الضَّرَرِّ وَالْمُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ بِأَمْوَالِهِمْ وَأَنْفُسِهِمْ

"(The believers who remain seated without any excuse are not equal to those who strive in the way of Allah with their wealth and their lives (Al-Mahdi Research Journal, 2021; Al-Afriqi, 1414 AH).

When this verse was first revealed, the Prophet (ﷺ) called Zayd ibn Thābit for writing it down. At that moment, the blind Companion 'Abdullāh ibn Umm Maktūm came forward and expressed his inability to join jihad due to his blindness.

Regarding this, the following ḥadīth is narrated:

عن البراء قال: لما نزلت لا يستوي القاعدون من المؤمنين دعا رسول الله زيدا فكتبها، فجاء ابن أم مكتوم فشكا ضرارته فأُنزل الله: غير أُولَى الضَّرَرِّ

(Al-Barā' narrated: When the verse "Lā yastawī al-qā'idūna mina al-mu'minīn" was revealed, the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) called Zayd (ibn Thābit) to write it. Then Ibn Umm Maktūm came and complained of his blindness, so Allah revealed the words "ghayru ulī al-ḍarar" (Al-Afriqi, 1414 AH).

Based on this verse and narration, the exegetes (mufasssīrūn) and jurists (fuqahā') have stated that Ulū al-Ḍarar includes those who have impaired vision, physical disability, illness, or other unavoidable limitations.

(ii) al-Ḍu'afā'

Allah says:

لَيْسَ عَلَى الضُّعَفَاءِ وَلَا عَلَى الْمَرْضَى وَلَا عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ مَا يَنْفِقُونَ حَرَجٌ إِذَا نَصَحُوا لِلَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ (Fayruzabadi, n.d.)

"(There is no blame on those who are weak, or ill, or those who do not possess resources to spend, provided that they are sincere to Allah and His Messenger (Al-Asfahani, H. M. al-R., 1414 AH))"

This verse provides a divine concession for individuals who suffer from physical limitations or lack of strength, relieving them from obligations they cannot fulfill due to disability.

(iii) al-Mustaḍ'afin

Allah says:

إِلَّا الْمُسْتَظْفَعِينَ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ وَالنِّسَاءِ وَالْوِلْدَانِ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ حِيلَةً وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ سَبِيلًا (Malouf, 1947)

"(Except for the oppressed among men, women, and children who cannot devise a plan nor are they able to find a way out (Fayruzabadi, n.d.))."

This category includes individuals who are genuinely unable to support themselves due to helplessness, physical inability, or lack of resources.

(iv) al-Fuqarā'

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Allah says:

إِنَّمَا الصَّدَقَاتُ لِلْفُقَرَاءِ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَالْعَامِلِينَ عَلَيْهَا ...

"(Charity is only for the poor, the needy, those employed to administer it (Malouf, L. (1947)". Classical Arabic lexicographers state that the term "faqīr" originally refers to one whose spine has been broken, rendering him unable to work. Hence, in Arabic etymology, "faqīr" was first used for a physically disabled person who is dependent on others for support.

Opinion of the Linguists Regarding al-Fuqarā'

The root word of al-fuqarā' is faqr, which linguists define as poverty, indigence and deprivation, referring to a person who does not possess sufficient sustenance beyond what is required to support his household.

Originally, a faqīr is one whose spinal bones have been fractured. The author of Lisān al-'Arab and Tāj al-'Arūs state:

(وهو ما انتصب من عظام الصلب من لدن الكاهل إلى العقب (Qasimi Kiranvi, n.d.)

(It refers to the bones of the spine arranged from the shoulders down to the tailbone.)

Imam Raghīb al-Asfahani writes:

الفقير: هو المكسور الفقار The Qur'an, (Surah Al-Hajj, 22:1175)

"A faqīr is a person whose vertebrae have been broken."

In light of the above Qur'anic verses, disability becomes a broad concept whose scope is clarified through the Islamic legal tradition. Shariah has provided numerous concessions for individuals with disabilities. They are exempted from migration (hijrah) and armed struggle (jihad). Similarly, Islam extends ease and facilitation to those who are weak or physically incapable, including elderly people and those in advanced age.

(b) The Need and Importance of Education and Training for Special Individuals in Society

In Islam, education and training hold immense value, providing comprehensive guidance for every aspect of life. Education is a fundamental human necessity, and for people with disabilities, its importance multiplies. Since disabled individuals face more complex social and practical challenges than others, it is essential to provide them with religious, practical and vocational education and training. Only then can they effectively cope with contemporary challenges and participate in society alongside others.

Before discussing the education and training of persons with disabilities in detail, it is important to briefly explain the meanings of ta'līm (education) and tarbiyah (training):

1. Meaning and Concept of Ta'līm (Education)

The word 'ilm means knowledge, understanding and perception, meaning "to know and recognize." It comes from the verbal root sam'a (to hear). For example, it is said جَلَّ عِلْمُهُ وَعَلَاهُمْ (Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri. (1972). Its plural is 'ulūm (sciences), while 'ālim means scholar, and its plural forms are 'ulamā' and 'allām.

When the word 'ilm is associated with a person and it is said 'alima al-rajul, it means "he has acquired true knowledge." And if it is attributed to a thing or matter, as in 'alima al-shay' or 'alima al-amr, it means "he came to know it with certainty and understanding (Al-Asfahani, 1988)."

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Maulana Waheed uz-Zaman Qasmi Kairanvi writes in al-Qāmūs al-Jadīd: “Ilm is the opposite of ignorance, meaning knowledge, instruction and information (Abdul Latif, 1997).”

2. Meaning and Concept of Tarbiyah (Training)

The word tarbiyah is derived from raba, which means to grow and increase. As the Qur'an states:

فَإِذَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا الْمَاءَ اهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ

“When We send down water upon the land, it stirs and swells (grows) (The Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:151).”

Likewise, in a Hadith it is stated: (The Qur'an, Surah Al-Imran, 3:118) وتربو في كف الرحمن حتى تكون

أعظم من الجبل

"Charity grows in the Hand of the Most Merciful until it becomes greater than a mountain."

According to Imam Raghīb al-Asfahani, based on the above verse and Hadith, tarbiyah means gradually nurturing something towards perfection (The Qur'an, Surah Al-Mujadalah, 58:11). Compared to tarbiyah (training), the scope of ta'lim (education) is limited, as education develops only intellectual abilities, whereas training nurtures all the natural capacities of a human being. However, the terms ta'lim and tarbiyah are sometimes used interchangeably. When mentioned together, they convey distinct meanings, but when each is used separately, both imply the same concept (Sijistani & Abu Dawud, 1430 AH).

From this, it becomes clear that if training develops all the innate abilities of a human being, then the education and training of persons with disabilities in society becomes even more significant.

The Need and Importance of Education and Training in Light of the Qur'an and Hadith

Allah Almighty has placed within human beings both good and evil tendencies. The Qur'an explicitly mentions this fact and clarifies that the very purpose of sending prophets was to provide education and training (ta'lim wa tarbiyah) to mankind. This has been stated in the Qur'an in the following manner:

كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِنْكُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

“As We have sent among you a Messenger from among yourselves, reciting to you Our verses, purifying you, teaching you the Book and wisdom, and teaching you that which you did not know.”

The excellence of people of knowledge has been mentioned in the Qur'an in the following words:

شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُوا الْعِلْمِ

“Allah bears witness that there is no deity except Him, and so do the angels and those endowed with knowledge (Hasan, n.d.).”

The Qur'an also declares that the ranks of those who possess knowledge are elevated:

يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

“Allah will raise in rank those among you who believe and those who have been given knowledge (Faroukh, n.d.).”

These verses clearly highlight the importance of knowledge and education. In addition to this,

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the following Hadith explains the virtue of seeking knowledge:

مَنْ سَلَكَ طَرِيقًا يَلْتَمِسُ فِيهِ عِلْمًا سَهَّلَ اللَّهُ لَهُ طَرِيقًا إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ، وَإِنَّ الْمَلَائِكَةَ لَتَضَعُ أجنحتها رِضًا لَطَالِبِ الْعِلْمِ

“Whoever follows a path seeking knowledge, Allah makes the path to Paradise easy for him, and the angels lower their wings in approval of the seeker of knowledge (Al-Bukhari, n.d.).”

In the light of the above-mentioned Qur’anic verses and Hadith, the importance of knowledge, education and training becomes absolutely clear. What could be a greater honor than the fact that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ declared that the path of knowledge leads to Paradise and that the angels pray for the seeker of knowledge?

(c) The Need and Importance of Education and Training for Special Individuals in Society

After understanding the meaning and significance of education and training, it is now necessary to examine why the education and training of special individuals (persons with disabilities) are essential. The purpose is that they may become productive members of society. Before presenting its importance, it is appropriate to briefly review the historical background of how special individuals were educated and trained in Islamic society.

Education and Training of Special Individuals in Islamic History

In order to discuss the education and training of special individuals in society, it is important to review Islamic history and observe how the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ interacted with persons with disabilities. The Companions, having directly benefited from the noble company of the Prophet ﷺ, witnessed how he educated, trained and assigned responsibilities to special individuals.

For example, the name of Abdullah ibn Umm Maktum appears frequently in Islamic tradition. He was appointed by the Prophet ﷺ as a teacher of religion, as confirmed by multiple narrations. Similarly, ‘Itbān ibn Mālik, a blind Companion, used to lead prayer for his tribe (Asqalani, n.d.).

After the passing of the Prophet ﷺ, special individuals continued to play vital roles in society during the era of the Companions. Abdullah ibn ‘Abbās, who holds a distinguished position in Qur’anic exegesis, lost his eyesight in old age. Despite his blindness, the senior Companions would visit him and seek knowledge from him. Renowned scholars of Tafsīr (Qur’anic exegesis) and Fiqh benefited from his knowledge, including his famous students among the Tābi‘īn such as Mujāhid and Qatādah (Ibn Majah, 1975).

Similarly, Ḥassān ibn Thābit, who is known as Shā‘ir al-Rasūl ﷺ (the Poet of the Prophet ﷺ), once became a victim of the conspiracy of the hypocrites in the incident of Ifk (slander), though it happened unintentionally. Later, he repented. In the final part of his life, Ḥassān ibn Thābit became blind, and even in that state he would visit Umm al-Mu‘minīn ‘Ā’ishah (RA) and recite poetry in her honor.

One of the most well-known examples is ‘Abdullāh ibn Umm Maktūm, whose name repeatedly appears in early Islamic sources. He was appointed by the Prophet ﷺ as a teacher of religion and was honored with responsibilities despite being blind. This is clearly established in authentic aḥādīth (Malik, 2007).

After the passing of the Prophet ﷺ, during the era of the Companions, persons with disabilities continued to occupy prominent scholarly and religious positions in society. For instance,

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‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās was highly esteemed for his expertise in tafsīr (Qur’anic exegesis). Although he lost his eyesight in old age, his blindness did not prevent him from teaching. Eminent scholars among the Tabi‘īn, such as Mujāhid and Qatādah, benefited immensely from his knowledge (Illingworth, n.d.).

Another notable example is Ḥassān ibn Thābit, the celebrated poet of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ (Shā‘ir al-Rasūl). He became blind in the later part of his life. Despite his disability, he would visit Umm al-Mu‘minīn ‘Ā’ishah and recite poetry in her gatherings. When Masrūq once asked her why she allowed Ḥassān to enter, considering the past misunderstandings involving him, she replied with remarkable wisdom, showing deep respect for his earlier service to Islam (Ibid., 188).

When Masrūq once asked Umm al-Mu‘minīn ‘Ā’ishah (RA) why she allowed Ḥassān to visit her despite the past incident, she replied:

إِنَّهُ كَانَ يُنَافِخُ أَوْ يُهَاجِي عَنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ (Mājah, 1975)

"He used to defend the Messenger of Allah ﷺ (or she said: he used to compose satire against the polytheists on behalf of the Prophet ﷺ)."

This proves that people with disabilities or physical limitations held respectable positions in Islamic society, and their abilities were recognized and honored.

The way the Prophet ﷺ provided education (ta‘līm) and moral-spiritual training (tarbiyah) to special persons is a guiding model for today’s society. Among those trained by the Prophet ﷺ was al-Sā‘ib ibn Furūkh, who was also blind. He became a renowned poet and is known by the title Abū al-‘Abbās al-Shā‘ir (Fārūq, n.d.). This reflects that the Prophet ﷺ granted dignity and opportunity to persons with disabilities, equipping them through education and tarbiyah (character-building) so they could become productive and valuable members of society.

Taking these examples into account, if we look at the present age, unfortunately people with disabilities are often subjected to inhumane and discriminatory treatment. This makes it a pressing social and moral obligation to provide proper education and tarbiyah to these individuals so they can perform significant roles in society and utilize their God-given abilities.

(d) The Necessity and Importance of Education and Training for Special Persons in Society

Special persons are an integral part of our society. Just like others, they also have the right to receive education and tarbiyah appropriate to their needs so they can walk alongside other members of society with dignity and confidence.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said:

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ (Ibid., 188)

"Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim."

This ḥadīth does not differentiate between a normal (non-disabled) person and a disabled person, nor between man and woman. It places all people without exception under the obligation of seeking knowledge. This makes it clear that people with disabilities also have the right, and responsibility, to gain knowledge and training so they can live with honor and independence.

Below are some points that highlight why the education and training of special persons is essential in society:

1. Social Awareness and Adaptation to the Environment

To help special persons become responsible citizens, it is essential to develop social awareness in them. If they are educated about their surroundings and trained to understand social situations, they can walk alongside the rest of society with dignity. Education and tarbiyah enable them to adapt to unfamiliar environments and reduce the sense of isolation or alienation they may experience, especially when they step outside their homes or familiar spaces.

Proper education helps build their confidence, allowing them to integrate into social settings and contribute positively. This adaptation is only possible when society accepts them and provides a welcoming environment (Awan, n.d.).

2. Training Centers and the Elimination of Psychological Problems

Specialized institutions and training centers play a vital role in the education and skill development of persons with disabilities. Through vocational training, many special individuals successfully learn trades and crafts, which helps them become economically independent rather than a financial burden on their families or society. In some cases, they even become providers for their families (Awan, n.d.).

Because of social neglect, many special persons struggle with psychological issues such as frustration, insecurity, inferiority complex, and social withdrawal. Education and training nurture their personality, build confidence, and eliminate psychological barriers (Malik, 2007). Without education, these individuals often fall into isolation and emotional distress, but structured tarbiyah helps them lead stable and purposeful lives.

Through training centers, special persons gain exposure to society in a free and supportive environment where they can discover and polish their abilities. This builds their self-reliance and enables them to contribute meaningfully to society, just like other citizens (Ibid., 156).

Just as educating and training mentally challenged individuals requires effort and specialized methods, the education and training of physically disabled persons also demand serious attention. However, since such individuals are usually mentally capable and aware, they can be made productive members of society (Ākāsh, 2010). In today's technologically advanced world, various assistive devices have made their lives easier and have enabled them to participate actively in social and economic activities (Ibid., 25/40).

For example, prosthetic limbs can replace missing parts of the body, such as artificial legs or arms, allowing individuals to perform many daily functions. A person deprived of both legs can use a wheelchair, learning to maneuver it independently with the help of their upper body strength. The sciences of Prosthetics and Orthotics also incorporate engineering tools and biomechanical techniques. These devices enable physically disabled persons to make maximum use of their remaining physical abilities. Through such assistance, they can engage in daily social activities and achieve self-reliance. Modern technology has now made assistive tools even more efficient, user-friendly, and widely accessible (Hasan, n.d.).

This means that if special persons are given slight attention, appropriate education and training, and assistive equipment, they can become responsible, active, and productive citizens, each contributing to the welfare of society according to their potential.

Use of Typewriter

The typewriter has historically been an effective tool for special persons to express their ideas. It has played an important role in their educational development and training. Those who can use their hands and fingers operate the typewriter with ease and can communicate effectively through writing. Nowadays, even more advanced typing devices have been developed that require minimal physical effort to operate (Ibid., 235/42).

9. Establishing a System of Financial Support

Financial support plays a critical role in the education and rehabilitation of special persons. The biggest source of funding is usually the government, followed by philanthropists. Governments allocate funds from annual budgets, while philanthropists contribute through charity and zakat. Sometimes financial assistance is also provided in the form of technical devices for disabled persons.

In addition, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also play a significant role. These NGOs work for the rehabilitation, education, and training of special persons and help in fulfilling their basic needs. Members of such organizations mobilize donations using their personal and social networks, often contributing from their own resources as well.

This shows that the government, philanthropists, and NGOs play a major role in developing educational and training opportunities for special persons and enabling them to become productive citizens.

10. Education and Training for Physical, Spiritual, and Mental Development

The mental, physical, and spiritual development of special persons is essential. Those suffering from intellectual disabilities especially require proper education and training, and this is one of the most sensitive and challenging tasks. Along with educational training, their spiritual upbringing and emotional development are also important so that they may become truly productive members of society (Ibid., 235/42).

For the overall development of such children, different training methodologies are adopted, such as:

Identifying the abilities of special persons and utilizing them properly

Understanding their temperament and behavior

Addressing their special needs

Adopting suitable teaching methods

Considering the environment, educational institutions, and surrounding society

This means that the nature of disability must be identified and educational strategies should be adjusted accordingly. For example, teaching methods for physically disabled persons might not require major changes, but educators must adopt entirely different approaches for hearing-impaired and visually impaired children (Al-Sijistani & Abu Dawud, 1430 AH).

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that society carries several responsibilities toward special persons. It must help them become confident and productive citizens. Training centers should be established for their mental and vocational development. Society should treat them with kindness and compassion, acknowledge their talents, and provide education that suits their needs. Modern technological tools and assistive devices must be made available to them. Furthermore, institutions working for their education and

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rehabilitation should be financially supported so they may continue to serve this important social cause.

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