

A Unique Path for Teaching Tolerance: Local Arab Heritage and Islamic Tradition in UAE Textbooks to Reinforce Values of Tolerance



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Foreword by Karima Matar Al Mazroui, PhD

Tolerance is one of the defining challenges of our time. In a world marked by polarization, mistrust, and fragmentation, the ability to cultivate openness and mutual respect is no longer optional; it is essential to the survival of plural societies. The United Arab Emirates has recognized this with clarity and conviction. In recent years, it has woven tolerance into the very fabric of its national identity, through institutions, policies, and initiatives that affirm coexistence as both a moral duty and a practical necessity.

The introduction of the Moral Education curriculum in 2016 was a landmark moment in this effort. For the first time, tolerance and ethical values were not left to implicit socialization or informal practice but were made the centerpiece of a structured, national curriculum. Since then, the UAE has complemented this educational project with a series of bold initiatives: the creation of a Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence, the declaration of 2019 as the Year of Tolerance, the enactment of laws prohibiting discrimination and hate speech, and the establishment of enduring symbols such as the Abrahamic Family House, which embodies interfaith harmony and dialogue. Taken together, these efforts represent one of the most comprehensive national strategies for embedding tolerance in both civic life and education anywhere in the world.

This paper, *The UAE's Unique Path for Teaching Tolerance: Arab and Islamic Heritage in UAE Textbooks to Reinforce Modern Values of Universal Morality*, offers an important and timely analysis of how tolerance is presented in the UAE's educational system. It shows how textbooks, especially those in the Moral Education curriculum, draw on Arab and Islamic heritage to promote respect, coexistence, and universal morality. By documenting the integration of local traditions with global values, the paper demonstrates how the UAE seeks to prepare a generation of young people who can live confidently in their identity while engaging openly with others.

What is striking about the UAE's approach is that it positions tolerance not as a concession to modernity, but as an extension of deep cultural and religious resources. The emphasis on Islamic teachings of compassion and hospitality, Arab traditions of solidarity, and the values of mutual respect embedded in the nation's heritage ensures that tolerance is presented to students as authentic, rooted, and meaningful. At the same time, the curriculum situates these values within a universal moral framework, thereby linking the local to the global. This dual orientation is one of the UAE's great strengths: it shows that one can remain anchored in identity while embracing diversity.

Yet, as with all ambitious reforms, the challenge lies not only in what is written in textbooks but in what is lived in classrooms. Here, my own research across multiple countries, including the UAE, Finland, Japan, the United Kingdom, and France, highlights an important lesson. The strength of a curriculum lies not only in its content but also in the teachers who deliver it. Textbooks can inspire, but it is teachers who animate values, guide discussions, and model tolerance in daily interactions. Without specialized preparation and professional support, even the most thoughtfully designed curriculum risks being reduced to words on a page.

This is where the UAE faces its next great opportunity. The nation has already demonstrated unparalleled vision in embedding tolerance into its education system and public life. The next step is to ensure that teachers are recognized, trained, and empowered as the frontline custodians of this vision. In many systems worldwide, including the UAE, moral and tolerance education remains a field without specialist licensure, clear career pathways, or institutionalized professional communities. Teachers approach it with dedication but often

without the professional scaffolding needed to make tolerance education sustainable. Addressing this gap would not only deepen the impact of the Moral Education project but also establish the UAE as a global leader in professionalizing tolerance education.

Another frontier that demands attention is the digital realm. Young people today learn values not only from their families, teachers, and textbooks, but also from the algorithms that shape their online environments. Artificial intelligence systems, social media platforms, and personalized digital feeds play a powerful role in shaping perceptions of self and other. In this space, tolerance is tested and often strained: echo chambers amplify division, biases are coded into digital systems, and misinformation fosters mistrust. If tolerance education is to prepare students for the real world, it must equip them with the wisdom to navigate these challenges.

In my work, I have described this capacity as algorithmic phronesis, the ability to exercise practical moral judgment in digital contexts where algorithms, rather than human authorities, frame the choices. This is not an abstract challenge. It is a daily reality for students who encounter difference, debate, and conflict online. The UAE's Moral Education curriculum, with its existing attention to digital literacy and ethics, is uniquely placed to pioneer this integration: to teach not only face-to-face tolerance but also tolerance mediated by technology.

To advance this vision, I have proposed a 4D framework: Develop, Deliver, Digitize, Sustain.

Develop: Deepen the grounding of the curriculum in Arab and Islamic heritage while connecting it to universal values, ensuring both authenticity and relevance.

Deliver: Support teachers with specialized training, inquiry-based pedagogies, and professional recognition, enabling them to translate ideals into practice.

Digitize: Integrate digital ethics and AI dilemmas into moral education, preparing students for the challenges of algorithmically mediated lives.

Sustain: Institutionalize tolerance education through specialist licensure, professional networks, and long-term recognition, ensuring it is not a temporary initiative but a lasting field of practice.

The UAE has already advanced significantly in the first dimension, Develop, through the careful design of its textbooks and curriculum. The broader national initiatives, from ministries and laws to interfaith institutions, have reinforced this development at the societal level. The next horizon lies in Deliver, Digitize, and Sustain: empowering teachers, embedding digital ethics, and institutionalizing the field. These steps would not only close the gap between vision and practice but also amplify the UAE's role as a global model.

What makes the UAE's experience so inspiring is that it demonstrates tolerance as both a policy priority and a lived reality. The Moral Education curriculum, the Ministry of Tolerance, the Year of Tolerance, the Abrahamic Family House, and anti-discrimination laws all work together to create an ecosystem in which coexistence is visible, tangible, and actionable. Few countries have achieved such coherence between curriculum, policy, and social practice.

The task now is to consolidate these gains into a sustainable legacy. Tolerance education should not only reflect current policy priorities; it should prepare generations of students to carry those values into the future, including into contexts we cannot yet predict. By professionalizing teachers, integrating digital ethics, and sustaining institutional frameworks, the UAE can ensure that its leadership in tolerance is not episodic but enduring.

For these reasons, I welcome this paper as both an important study of the present and a springboard for the future. It captures the unique achievements of the UAE in embedding tolerance in its curriculum, while also inviting us to consider what more can be done. It reminds us that tolerance is not a static value but a living practice that must be nurtured through education, law, policy, and community. And it challenges us to see education not only as the transmission of knowledge but as the cultivation of wisdom, empathy, and coexistence.

The UAE has already made remarkable strides. By aligning curriculum with policy, and heritage with universal values, it has set a powerful example. By now turning to the professionalization of teachers, the integration of digital ethics, and the institutionalization of tolerance education, it has the opportunity to set a global standard. In a century that will test societies with new divisions and new technologies, this is not only a national priority but a global necessity.

It is in this spirit that I commend this paper. It shows what is possible when a nation dares to make tolerance the heart of its educational vision, and it invites us to imagine what more might be possible when that vision is carried into classrooms, communities, and digital spaces alike.

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Introduction

In recent years, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has undertaken gradual yet consistent reforms of its school curricula across multiple subjects, implementing substantial changes and carefully embedding content that aligns with UNESCO's standards of education for peace and tolerance. Advocating for peaceful relations with other groups and nations, together with promoting multiple aspects of tolerance, both within Emirati society and outwards internationally, has become a recurring theme in all of the UAE's curricula across its various school subjects.

A central component of these reforms was the introduction of Moral Education as a distinct subject in the 2017-2018 school year, designed to complement existing curricula and further institutionalize principles of coexistence, mutual respect, and cultural appreciation. This subject, alongside Islamic Education, constitutes a core element of the UAE's educational framework, taught systematically from the first through the twelfth grades. Taken together, Moral Education and Islamic Education underscore the UAE's commitment to advancing tolerance as a guiding educational value. Moral Education situates lessons within the broader context of Emirati cultural heritage and traditions, while Islamic Education provides students with sustained engagement with religious texts and concepts, encouraging the application of that religious content to ethical and social concerns.

While both Islamic Education and Moral Education share the goal of cultivating ethical sensibility and social responsibility, they operate as complementary rather than overlapping pedagogical streams. Islamic Education draws its moral vocabulary from divine revelation, both the Qur'an and Hadith, anchoring values within scriptural authority and religious reasoning. Moral Education, by contrast, provides a civic and intercultural framework that translates those same values into a universal, pluralistic, and globally relevant context. Together, they constitute parallel and interacting dimensions of the UAE's educational architecture: one theological and transcendent, the other civic and dialogical. Their interaction, rather than fusion, enables the UAE's model to balance faith-based ethics with humanistic and cosmopolitan citizenship ideals, making it distinctive among global approaches to values education.

Within this framework, tolerance is illustrated through multiple dimensions: inter-religious tolerance, grounded in Quranic and Hadith-based teachings that promote respect, dialogue, and forgiveness; and inter-ethnic, political, and international tolerance, reinforced through narratives of Emirati heritage that highlight hospitality, solidarity, and peaceful coexistence.¹

This paper aims to illustrate how the UAE curricula mobilize both Arab cultural and local national heritage, as well as Islamic religious tradition, to reinforce messages of peace and tolerance. By drawing simultaneously on religious textual authority and national cultural identity, the curricula present tolerance not as an imported or externally imposed standard, but as an organic and deeply rooted value of Emirati society – thereby affirming the UAE's broader educational and social strategy in alignment with UNESCO's global framework for peace- and tolerance-oriented education. While this paper focuses on exemplar passages that most clearly articulate themes

¹ Karima Matar Almazroui, "Project-Based Learning for 21st-Century Skills: An Overview and Case Study of Moral Education in the UAE", in *The Social Studies* 114:3 (2023), pp. 125-136. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2022.2134281>
Eldad Pardo, "When Peace Goes to School: The Emirati Curriculum 2016-21", ed. David M. Byer. IMPACT-se (20 January, 2022): https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/When-Peace-Goes-to-School_The-Emirati-Curriculum-2016%E2%80%9321.pdf
Dina Tsamir & Hagai Yehoshafat, "United Arab Emirates Moral Education Textbooks: Preliminary Report", IMPACT-se (September, 2020): <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/IMPACT-se-UAE-ME-Preliminary-PREPUBLIC-REPORT.pdf>

of tolerance and coexistence from the UAE's Islamic and Moral Education curricula, past comprehensive review of the entire UAE's curricula confirmed that such themes are recurrent and systematically embedded across grade levels and subject areas.² The curricula emphasize that values such as peace-seeking, inter-group tolerance, and solidarity are not external or "Western" imports, but are instead intrinsic to Arab culture, local UAE heritage, and the Islamic religious tradition.

2 Eldad Pardo, "When Peace Goes to School: The Emirati Curriculum 2016-21", ed. David M. Byer. IMPACT-se (20 January, 2022): https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/When-Peace-Goes-to-School_The-Emirati-Curriculum-2016%E2%80%9321.pdf

Tolerance in UAE Curriculum: Local Arab Heritage and Islamic Tradition

The population of the historic UAE was shaped by a deeply tribal and predominantly nomadic social order that evolved in response to the harsh geography of southeastern Arabia. Tribes provided the essential framework for identity, protection, and economic cooperation in an environment with scarce resources and shifting desert conditions. Kinship determined political allegiance and access to land, while alliances and rivalries among confederations governed relations between the interior oases, the mountain valleys, and the coastal settlements. Originating from ancient Arab migrations of both southern (قَحْطَانِيّ / Yamānī) and northern (عَدْنَانِيّ / Nizārī) tribal descent, moving through central Arabia, the population settled the region through successive waves of movement and dispersal. These migrations produced complex relations between settled farmers, Bedouin pastoralists, and seafaring communities, whose livelihoods alternated between date cultivation, herding, and pearling. Tribal solidarity served as both a political and moral system, replacing formal institutions of government; leadership rested on lineage, personal authority, and consensus within the tribe. Even as the tribes dispersed across the deserts and coasts, kinship bonds endured, enabling collective mobilization in times of conflict or hardship. This structure fostered social cohesion, mutual aid, and a sense of continuity that long preceded the modern state, forming the enduring backbone of Emirati identity. Today, the legacy of these hierarchies remains visible: the Banū Yās confederation, once dominant in the Līwā and Dhafrah regions, underpins the leadership of Abu Dhabi and Dubai through the ruling Āl Nahyān and Āl Maktūm families, while the Qawāsim of Ra's al-Khaymah and Sharjah continue their historical role as maritime rulers on the northern coast. Both aforementioned groups exemplify how tribal legitimacy and genealogical lineage still shape, to a great extent, authority and social belonging in the contemporary UAE.³

In addition to the tribal aspect, Islam was both a formative historic force and an enduring moral foundation of life in the territories that later became the UAE. Islam reached the region soon after Prophet Muhammad's lifetime in the seventh century AD; from its earliest acceptance, it came to permeate every aspect of social, political, and economic existence. Having taken root early in the region's history, it was never a distant or abstract system of belief but a lived moral code that infused daily practice. The local population, almost entirely Sunni Muslim in recent centuries, has followed different juristic schools (*madhab fiqhī* مَذْهَبٌ فِقْهِيّ) and encompasses communities that adhere to the Hanbali, Maliki, and Shāfi'i schools. Yet, these juristic distinctions rarely ever held real importance in the historic lands that later became the UAE. Instead, religious life was marked by cohesion and the relative absence of doctrinal or sectarian tension. Without a formal clerical hierarchy, religious leadership was local and personal: each community maintained its mosque through endowments, and local scholars and teachers guided worship and education. Islam offered the shared ethical vocabulary through which justice, family life, charity, and rulership were understood, and it provided the ultimate point of reference for resolving disputes and defining communal responsibilities. Deeply intertwined with tribal structures, it tempered older traditions of vengeance and hierarchy by asserting equality and moral accountability before God. In this way, Islam in the Trucial Coast states (historic UAE lands) was both the spiritual and social cement of the population – a pragmatic and not narrowly literalist faith that unified disparate tribes under a single moral and cultural order.⁴

3 Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition*, London: Longman Group (1982), pp. 18-72.

4 Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates: A Society in Transition*, London: Longman Group (1982), pp. 126-160.

In the UAE curriculum of Moral Education, Emirati local culture and heritage are main recurring themes, whereas Islamic Education focuses on providing students with knowledge and materials on Islamic religious tradition. Both Moral Education and Islamic Education comprise a considerable part of UAE school curricula and are taught consistently across all age groups. Education for tolerance is demonstrated throughout UAE curricula, reflecting the many ways that inter-group tolerance can be understood, practiced and promoted, and which the curriculum seeks to encourage among students.

Islamic Tradition

The Qur'an and the Hadith are the two most foundational and authoritative sources in Islam, and as such normally comprise the main portion of the Islamic Education curriculum in any Muslim country. The Qur'an, believed to be the direct word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, defines the core tenets of faith, moral principles, and laws guiding all aspects of life. The Hadith – records of the Prophet's sayings, actions, and approvals – complements the Qur'an by providing practical interpretation and context for its teachings. Together, they form the basis of Islamic theology, ethics, and jurisprudence, shaping both personal conduct and the structure of Muslim societies. In the case of the UAE curriculum, one of the main forms of tolerance emphasized by school curricula using Islamic religious tradition is **inter-religious tolerance**, avoiding discriminatory or hostile attitudes towards followers of other religions. One example is a lesson about "intellectual tolerance" (*al-tasāmuḥ al-fikrī* (التَّسَامُحُ الْفِكْرِيّ)) in an Islamic Education textbook for Grade 9, addressing the Quranic text of *Surah Al-Hajj* (22), verse 17. The verse determines the existence of differentiations between the various faiths: "Indeed, the believers [i.e. Muslims], Jews, Sabians, Christians, Magians [i.e. Zoroastrians], and the idolators – Allah will judge between them all on Judgment Day. Surely Allah is a Witness over all things." The textbook chapter uses this Quranic verse to discuss and promote inter-faith dialogue and mutual respect, claiming that Islam preached to find a balance between intellectual debate and calling on followers of other religions to embrace Islam on one hand, and granting them freedom to practice their beliefs based on evidence from the Islamic textual fundamentals on the other hand.⁵

Another example can be found in an Islamic Education textbook for Grade 6, where it is determined that tolerance towards all human beings and mutual respect, especially towards non-Muslims, are core imperatives of Islam. This is supported by numerous Quranic verses and Hadith references, cited as textual evidence, including *Surah Al-Mumtahanah* (60), verse 8; *Surah Al-Anbiya* (21), verse 107; *Surah Al-Baqarah* (2), verse 195; and sayings of Prophet Muhammad and his wife Aysha.⁶

(The example is presented on the following page)

⁵ *Islamic Education*, Grade 9, Trimester 3, 2021-2022, pp. 46-55.

⁶ *Islamic Education*, Grade 6, Trimester 2, 2022-2023, pp. 87-100.

From Islamic Education, Grade 9, Trimester 3, 2021-2022, p. 48:

أولاً: مفهوم التسامح الفكري ومحدوده

التسامح هو: احترام حق الآخرين في التمتع بحقوقهم وحرّياتهم، وثقافتاتهم. ويقابله التعصب، والانغلاق الفكري، الذي يرفضه الإسلام ويمقتّه؛ سواء أكان من أجل جماعة، أم كان من أجل مذهب، أم فكر، فالتسامح يتضمّن إقراراً بأنّ البشر مختلفون في أفكارهم ومعتقداتهم، ولهم الحق في العيش بأمان دون فرض للآراء، أو إجبار على اعتناق المعتقدات، قال تعالى: ﴿لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ﴾ (البقرة 256)، فالاختلاف واقع حتمي، وسنّه إلهية، قال تعالى: ﴿وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَجَعَلَ النَّاسَ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَا يَزَالُونَ مُخْتَلِفِينَ﴾ (هود)، فقد تعايش المسلمون على مرّ القرون مع مختلف الأفكار والعقائد في مجتمع واحد، ونظروا إلى من يخالفهم نظرة معتدلة، عنوانها الرحمة، وقانونها العدل، وأساسها احترام كرامة الإنسان. إلا أنّ التسامح له حدود فلا يعني قبول العدوان من الآخرين، أو تخلي المرء عن معتقده والتهاون بشأنها، وفي الوقت ذاته لا نسفه الآخرين، ولا نحقر معتقداتهم، وإنما نجادلهم ونحاورهم بالتي هي أحسن.

"Tolerance: respecting the right of others to enjoy their rights, freedoms, and cultures.

"Its opposites are bigotry and intellectual close-mindedness, which Islam rejects and detests – whether it is on behalf of a group, a juristic school, or an ideology. Tolerance implies reaffirming that human beings differ in their ideology and beliefs, and they have the right to live in peace without having opinions forced upon them or being compelled to believe in certain beliefs. The Almighty said: 'No compulsion in religion' [Quran, Surah Al-Baqarah (2), verse 256]. Nonuniformity is a definitive fact and a divine Sunnah. The Almighty said: 'Had your Lord so willed, He would have certainly made humanity one single community, but they still differ' [Quran, Surah Hud (11), verse 118]. The Muslims have coexisted throughout the centuries with the various ideologies and beliefs in one society, viewed with moderation whoever differed from them, made compassion their slogan, justice their law, and respecting human dignity their principle.

"Nevertheless, tolerance has its limits, and it does not mean accepting hostility from others or relinquishing one's beliefs and dismissing them. At the same time, we do not ridicule others, and we do not disrespect their beliefs, but we debate them and converse with them in the best manner [reference to Quran, Surah Al-Nahl (16), verse 125, or alternatively Surah Al-Ankabut (29), verse 46]."

Another example from a Grade 9 Islamic Education textbook presents students with Quran and Hadith references, encouraging students to embrace the commendable divine virtue of forgiveness, and to show tolerance towards those who erred, in hope that the latter may repent and seek Allah's redemption.⁷ In two other examples from Grade 6 and 9 Islamic Education textbooks, the role model of Prophet Muhammad as the leader of the community of Medina is referenced as an example of mutual respect, compassion toward all peoples, cross-religious and cross-tribal cooperation, successful inter-community coexistence, and denunciation of bigotry and extremism.⁸ Another example in a Grade 12 Islamic Education textbook refers to *Surah Al-Kafirun* (109), verse 6; *Surah Yusuf* (12), verse 103; *Surah Hud* (11), verses 118-119; and many more Quranic quotes in order to explain that the existence of diverse faiths and religions among the people of the world is a natural fact of life.⁹

⁷ Islamic Education, Grade 9, Trimester 1, 2023-2024, pp. 28-37.

⁸ Islamic Education, Grade 6, Trimester 1, 2023-2024, pp. 122-129.
Islamic Education, Grade 9, Trimester 1, 2023-2024, pp. 97-99.

⁹ Islamic Education, Grade 12, Trimester 3, 2019-2020, pp. 26-36.

A recurring theme throughout the examined UAE curricula is the use of selected references and remarks from past and present most notable local leaders. In a Moral Education textbook for Grade 2, students are presented with a quote by Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum (born 1949), the UAE's Vice President and Prime Minister, and the current ruler of the Dubai Emirate. In his remarks, Sheikh Muhammad stresses that religious and ethnic differences are a natural feature created by Allah, and that people in the UAE achieve a peaceful life together despite their religious, ethnic, racial, and other differences owing to shared interest in a better life and a sentiment of commonality and mutual tolerance.¹⁰

From Moral Education, Grade 6, Trimester 2, 2022-2023, p. 65:

ج. اقرأ ما قاله صاحب السمو الشيخ محمد بن راشد آل مكتوم , نائب رئيس الدولة - رئيس مجلس الوزراء حاكم دبي - رعاه الله، في يوم التسامح العالمي الموافق 16 نوفمبر 2017.

"إن أكثر ما نفاجز به الناس والعالم بأننا دولة يعيش فيها جميع البشر - على اختلافاتهم التي خلقهم الله عليها - بمحبة حقيقية وتسامح حقيقي... يعيشون ويعملون معاً لبناء مستقبل أبنائهم دون خوف من تعصب أو كراهية أو تمييز أو عنصرية أو تفرقة بناء على لون أو دين أو طائفة أو عرق".

بم شعرت عند قراءة هذه المقولة؟

"[...] C. Read what His Highness Sheikh Muhammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum – the country's vice president, prime minister, and ruler of Dubai – may Allah protect him, said on World Tolerance Day on 16th November 2017.

"The thing we boast most to other people and the world is that we are a country where all of humanity lives, despite the differences that Allah created them with, with real love and real tolerance. They live and work together to build the future of their children without fear of bigotry, hatred, racial discrimination, or distinction based on color, religion, community, or ethnicity."

"What did you feel when you read this quote? [...]"

¹⁰ Moral Education, Grade 6, Trimester 2, 2022-2023, p. 65.

Local Customs, Heritage, and Culture

Another form of tolerance promoted in UAE curricula, through the use of local cultural heritage, is political, inter-ethnic, and international tolerance, which fosters peaceful relations between rival social groups both within and external to the country. In a Moral Education textbook for Grade 2, it is claimed that heritage (*turāt* تراث) and culture (*thaqāfa* ثقافة) can differ among members of society from different backgrounds, yet those members are still eligible for integration into society and coexistence.¹¹ Following that, Moral Education textbooks of both Grades 3 and 10 claim that the UAE is culturally diverse, encompassing multiple different cultures and emphasizing tolerance towards other cultures present in the country.¹² Nevertheless, the importance of Bedouin customs and heritage in UAE culture is also explicitly referenced.¹³ One example appears in a Grade 1 Moral Education textbook, where a lesson on the Emirati Arab storytelling tradition features a text about a child and her grandmother. The grandmother tells a story about her own grandfather, who was the chieftain of a local Bedouin tribe, and how in the times of a harsh drought, he shared his tribe's water and food with a rival tribe which lost all its livestock and food. Here, the UAE Bedouin culture of hospitality is used to support national social solidarity and inter-group tolerance and inclusiveness.¹⁴

In two other examples in Grade 3 Moral Education textbooks, hospitality (*ḥusn al-ḍiyāfa* حُسن الضيافة) towards foreign guests is presented as part of the UAE's national heritage. The UAE is defined as a culturally diverse society, comprising of many different cultures originating from various countries. While all cultures are free to be openly practiced in the UAE, they also share more similarities than one might initially assume. Furthermore, those living in the UAE whose family originates from elsewhere, are customarily referred to as “newcomers” (*wāfidūn* وافدون), rather than other possible common terms such as “foreigners” (*ajānib* أجانب) or “migrants” (*muhājirūn* مهاجرون).¹⁵

In a Grade 4 Moral Education textbook, students are taught that respecting others is part of the Emirati *Sanʿ* (السنة) – the local system of customs, traditions, manners, and norms on how to treat others with respect, based on Arab Bedouin social values and principles.¹⁶ Here too, in the context of local-UAE and Arab culture, quotes of eminent past and present Emirati leaders are used to reassert the curricula's taught notions of tolerance. In a Grade 8 Moral Education textbook, students are taught that when preparing for the establishment of the independent UAE and the leadership of the state and the Abu Dhabi Emirate in 1971, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (1918-2004) immersed himself in the life of local tribes, and lived among them during the late 1920s and early 1930s. That experience is said to have allowed him to become more familiar with the local Bedouin cultural heritage and way of life, and helped him to acquire the Bedouin and Islamic traits needed for his future roles in leadership, such as tolerance, patience, wisdom, and perceptiveness.¹⁷

Two additional examples found in Grade 6 Islamic Education textbooks draw on events from the life of Prophet Muhammad, including the Battle of Badr (624 AD / 2 Hijrah), to emphasize that peaceful coexistence and dialogue form the foundation of natural and normative relations between nations and individuals, except in cases of self-defense.¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that the Battle of Badr is often presented as a decisive victory

11 *Moral Education*, Grade 2, Trimester 3, 2020-2021, pp. 39-42.

12 *Moral Education*, Grade 3, Trimester 3, 2020-2021, pp. 59-60.
Moral Education, Grade 10, Trimester 2, 2020-2021, pp. 18-19.

13 *Moral Education*, Grade 3, Trimester 3, 2020-2021, p. 57.

14 *Moral Education*, Grade 1, Trimester 2, 2017-2018, pp. 11-14.

15 *Moral Education*, Grade 3, Trimester 2, 2020-2021, pp. 16-20, 22-26.
Moral Education, Grade 3, Trimester 3, 2020-2021, pp. 51-54, 56.

16 *Moral Education*, Grade 4, Trimester 1, 2025-2026, p. 7.

17 *Moral Education*, Grade 8, trimester 1, 2023-2024, p. 28.

18 *Islamic Education*, Grade 6, trimester 1, 2023-2024, p. 48.
Islamic Education, Grade 6, trimester 2, 2022-2023, pp. 105-106.

for the few Muslims over the numerous non-believers, to vindicate the Muslims' true belief and as evidence of the support they receive from Allah in their struggle against the Idolaters.¹⁹ Yet, these examples in the UAE curriculum reframe a foundational military event in early Islamic history into a moral narrative emphasizing mercy, education, and peacebuilding. The focus is shifted from what is usually referred to as martial valor and theological vindication to intellectual and ethical development, suggesting also that moral victory lies in peaceful relations and forgiveness.

Furthermore, a concluding note at the end of one of the examples mentions the continuous efforts of the UAE's leadership to support diplomatic agreements and spread peace across the world, situating the historical Islamic account within a modern Emirati national narrative. It aligns Islamic tradition with state policy, presenting the UAE as the contemporary heir to the Prophet's same peaceful ethos.

From Islamic Education, Grade 6, trimester 2, 2022-2023, p. 106:

الدُّرُسُ الْخَامِسُ

أَخْلَاقِيَّاتُ التَّعَامُلِ مَعَ الْآخَرِ:

أَسَرَ الْمُسْلِمُونَ نَحْوَ سَبْعِينَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ، افْتَدَى بَعْضُهُمْ بِالْمَالِ، وَبَعْضُهُمُ الْآخَرُ بِتَعْلِيمِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ الْقِرَاءَةَ وَالْكِتَابَةَ، كَمَا صَدَرَ عَقْوٌ عَنْ أُسْرَى آخَرِينَ فَقَرَأَ لَدَيْهِمْ مَا يُمَكِّنُهُمْ مِنْ افْتِدَاءِ أَنْفُسِهِمْ بِهِ. عَنِ ابْنِ عَبَّاسٍ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا قَالَ: "كَانَ نَاسٌ مِنَ الْأَسْرَى يَوْمَ بَدْرٍ لَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُمْ فِدَاءٌ، فَجَعَلَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ فِدَاءَهُمْ أَنْ يُعَلِّمُوا أَوْلَادَ الْأَنْصَارِ الْكِتَابَةَ"، فَاللَّهُ لَمْ يَخْلُقِ النَّاسَ لِيَتَعَادَوْا أَوْ يَتَحَارَبُوا، وَإِنَّمَا خَلَقَهُمْ لِيَتَعَارَفُوا وَيَتَأَلَّفُوا وَيُعِينَ بَعْضُهُمْ بَعْضًا، ﴿وَاللَّهُ يَدْعُو إِلَى دَارِ السَّلَامِ وَيَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ﴾ [يُونُسُ: 25].

افْكُرْ وَأَعْلَنْ:

✱ مَا يَأْتِي:



✱ عَقْوُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ عَنِ الْأَسْرَى، وَإِطْلَاقُ سَرَاحِهِمْ.

1

✱ فِدَاءُ الْأَسْرَى بِتَعْلِيمِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ الْقِرَاءَةَ وَالْكِتَابَةَ.

2

✱ سَعْيُ الْقِيَادَةِ الرَّشِيدَةِ بِدَوْلَةِ الْإِمَارَاتِ الْعَرَبِيَّةِ الْمُتَّحِدَةِ الْمُسْتَمِرِّ فِي دَعْمِ الْمُصَالِحَاتِ وَنَشْرِ السَّلَامِ فِي مَخْتَلَفِ بَقَاعِ الْأَرْضِ.

3

(See the continuation of the example on the following page)

19 Khalil Athamina, "Badr", eds. K. Fleet, G. Krämer, D. Matringe, J. Nawas, & D. J. Stewart, Encyclopaedia of Islam Three Online, Brill (2011): https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_23697

“Fifth Lesson [– The Grand Battle of Badr]

“The Morals of Interacting with the Other:

“The Muslims imprisoned about seventy Idolaters, some of whom were ransomed in exchange for money, some were redeemed in exchange for teaching the Muslims reading and writing, and other captives that were poor and did not have the means to redeem themselves were pardoned. According to Ibn ‘Abbas – May Allah be pleased with him: ‘There were people among the captives on the Battle of Badr that did not have a ransom [to pay for their release], so the Messenger of Allah – Allah’s Peace and Blessing upon him – set their ransom to be teaching writing to the children of the Anṣār.’ Allah did not create people to be hostile to each other or fight one another, but He created them to get to know one another [reference to Quran, Surah Al-Hujurat (49), verse 13], to work together, and to support each other. ‘And Allah invites all to the Realms of Peace and guides whoever He wills to the Straight Path.’ [Quran, Surah Yunus (10), verse 25]

“I shall reflect and explain:

“The following:

“(1) The Muslims pardoned the prisoners and released them.

“(2) The prisoners were redeemed in exchange for teaching reading and writing to the Muslims.

“(3) The rightly-guided leadership of the state of the United Arab Emirates exerts continuous efforts to support peace treaties and spread peace across the various parts of the world.”

Crossroads Identity and Regional Cosmopolitanism

In its Moral Education curriculum, the UAE emphasizes its position as a key agent in the promotion of world peace, stability, and tolerance between countries, cultures, and religions, both domestically and globally. It similarly promotes the UAE as being a cultural bridge between East and West, housing people from all cultures, and accommodating places of worship and free practice of religion for all major faiths without discrimination.²¹ In a Grade 2 Moral Education textbook, students are taught that the colors of the UAE national banner symbolize equality, generosity, growth, peace, and doing good deeds.²² Furthermore, it is taught that international commerce is an age-old phenomenon in the Arabian Peninsula, permitting the exchange of cultures and establishing intercultural relations with different geographic regions in the world, such as the Mediterranean, East Africa, South Asia, and China.²³ In another example, a Grade 10 Moral Education textbook argues that a commerce and business-oriented society such as the UAE’s ought to familiarize itself with and tolerate other cultures in order to maintain mutually respectful and beneficial trade relations.²⁴ The same textbook also teaches that mutual respect and understanding, tolerance, acceptance, and coexistence are all authentic values that are deeply rooted in Emirati society, and are an integral part of its culture, thus enabling inter-faith and inter-ethnic tolerance, successfully accommodating over 200 different cultural and religious communities in the UAE.²⁵ In a Grade 10 Moral Education textbook, a quote by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan (1948-2022), former UAE president and ruler of Abu Dhabi, discusses the importance the UAE sees in its

20 The Anṣār – (*al-Anṣār*) lit. “the allies”, i.e. the supporters and allies of Prophet Muhammad among the local population of Medina after his migration there, unlike the Migrants (*al-Muhājirūn*), who are the Prophet’s followers who came with him from Mecca to Medina. See: W. Montgomery Watt, “al-Anṣār”, ed. P. Bearman, *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)*, Brill (2012): https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_0678

21 *Moral Education*, Grade 4, Trimester 1, 2025-2026, pp. 25-26.

22 *Moral Education*, Grade 2, Trimester 3, 2020-2021, pp. 55-66.

23 *Moral Education*, Grade 4, Trimester 2, 2017-2018, pp. 9-14.

24 *Moral Education*, Grade 10, Trimester 2, 2020-2021, p. 22.

25 *Moral Education*, Grade 10, Trimester 2, 2020-2021, p. 75.

cultural and ethnic diversity, claiming it to be a major stimulant in the country's economic growth, intellectual moderation, tolerance, and openness.²⁶

From Moral Education, Grade 10, trimester 2, 2020-2021, p. 50:

إننا ندرك ونقدر التنوع الثقافي والبشري الذي نعتبره محركاً رئيسياً للتنمية المستدامة ووسيلة لتعميق ثقافة الانفتاح والحوار والتواصل والتعايش، ونبذ التعصب والتطرف والعزلة الفكرية.

صاحب السمو الشيخ خليفة بن زايد آل نهيان - رئيس الدولة - حفظه الله -

"[...] 'Indeed, we are aware and appreciative of the cultural and human diversity, which we consider a major stimulant for sustainable growth and a means to deepening the culture of openness, dialogue, interaction, and coexistence, and rejecting bigotry, extremism, and intellectual isolationism.'

"His Highness, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the country's president – may Allah keep him safe"

²⁶ Moral Education, Grade 10, Trimester 2, 2020-2021, p. 50.

Conclusion

The UAE school curricula, through the dual framework of Moral Education and Islamic Education, provide a coherent and multi-layered approach to embedding values of tolerance across all stages of schooling. By drawing simultaneously on Islamic religious tradition and Emirati cultural heritage, the curricula construct a vision of tolerance that is both rooted in local identity and aligned with global educational standards. The use of Quranic verses, Hadith traditions, and the role model of Prophet Muhammad, legitimizes inter-religious dialogue, forgiveness, and respect for human diversity within an Islamic framework.

At the same time, the invocation of Bedouin customs, hospitality practices, and national narratives of inclusivity situates tolerance as a historically and socially grounded Emirati value. This dual reliance on religious authority and local cultural identity allows the curricula to present tolerance not as an abstract or externally imposed notion, but as a lived and authentic dimension of Emirati society. It extends beyond inter-religious respect to encompass national solidarity, multicultural coexistence, political inclusivity, and international engagement, promoting peaceful relations domestically and abroad. In doing so, the UAE positions its education system as both a mechanism of social cohesion and a platform for bridging civilizations globally. At a time when many societies turn inward amid rising isolationism and cultural protectionism, the UAE positions itself not merely as a passive midpoint, but an active bridge between East and West. Its educational model embodies dialogue rather than division, presenting tolerance as a proactive alternative to global trends of fragmentation.

In this sense, the UAE's approach to education does not merely mirror global pluralism but actively contributes to it through institutional and curricular innovation. Importantly, the curricula reaffirm that values such as peace-seeking, inter-group tolerance, and solidarity are not foreign or "Western" imports artificially introduced into Arab Muslim society. Rather, they are deeply rooted in Arab culture, local heritage, and Islamic religious tradition. This fusion of the universally implemented modern concepts of tolerance, combined with the local and Islamic traditional notions of the UAE, not only equips students to contribute to a pluralistic and cooperative world but also offers a model that could inspire similar educational reforms across the Arab and Muslim worlds.

The ultimate test of this curricular vision lies in its translation from text to classroom practice. The UAE continues to address this through sustained teacher professional development programs that emphasize dialogical pedagogy, intercultural competence, and the enactment of values as lived practice rather than abstract content. In this sense, the UAE's curriculum represents an ongoing process of transforming moral ideals into educational reality, a transition increasingly recognized as essential in international education research on values-based learning.