

Decolonizing Islamic Education: Ibn Khaldun's *'Ilm al-'Umran* as a Critical Alternative to Eurocentric Educational Paradigms

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Received: 3-3-2025 | Revised: 21-8-2025 | Accepted: 18-11-2025

Abstract

This article examines Ibn Khaldun's *'Ilm al-'Umran* as a critical framework for decolonizing Islamic education and challenging the dominance of Eurocentric educational paradigms. While modern educational systems in many Muslim and Global South contexts remain shaped by Western epistemological assumptions, standardized rationalities, and secular models of knowledge, Ibn Khaldun's civilizational thought offers an alternative grounded in Islamic metaphysics, historical consciousness, empirical observation, social cohesion, and ethical formation. Using a qualitative library-based method and conceptual-critical analysis, this article explores the philosophical foundations of *'Ilm al-'Umran*, its relevance to contemporary Islamic education, and its potential contribution to curriculum reform, critical consciousness, and epistemic justice. The discussion argues that *'Ilm al-'Umran* should not be treated merely as a historical theory of civilization, but as a dynamic epistemological framework capable of reconstructing Islamic education in more contextual, ethical, and socially responsive ways. The article concludes that a Khaldunian approach can enrich decolonial education by integrating Islamic epistemology, local knowledge traditions, critical pedagogy, and civilizational awareness.

Keywords

Ibn Khaldun, *'ilm al-'umran*, Islamic education, decolonial education, eurocentrism, Islamic epistemology, critical pedagogy education

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji *'Ilm al-'Umran* Ibn Khaldun sebagai landasan teoretis untuk mendekolonisasi pendidikan Islam dari dominasi paradigma pendidikan Eurosentris. Dalam banyak konteks masyarakat Muslim dan Global South, pendidikan modern masih banyak dibentuk oleh asumsi rasionalitas Barat, sekularisasi pengetahuan, standardisasi kurikulum, dan klaim universalitas yang sering kali menempatkan epistemologi Islam serta pengetahuan lokal sebagai unsur tambahan, bukan sebagai fondasi keilmuan. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kepustakaan dengan analisis konseptual-kritis dan hermeneutis, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa *'Ilm al-'Umran* tidak hanya relevan sebagai teori peradaban, tetapi juga sebagai kerangka epistemologis bagi pendidikan Islam. Pemikiran Ibn Khaldun mengintegrasikan observasi empiris, kesadaran historis, solidaritas sosial, pembentukan moral, dan metafisika Islam. Karena itu, dekolonisasi pendidikan Islam tidak cukup dilakukan dengan menambahkan konten Islam ke dalam kurikulum modern, tetapi memerlukan rekonstruksi dasar epistemologis pendidikan itu sendiri. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa model pendidikan Islam berbasis pemikiran Khaldunian dapat berkontribusi pada reformasi kurikulum, pembentukan guru, pedagogi kritis, kohesi sosial, dan keadilan epistemik.

Keywords

Ibn Khaldun, *Ilm al-'Umran*, pendidikan Islam, dekolonisasi pendidikan, paradigma Eurosentris, epistemologi Islam, pedagogi kritis

Introduction

Modern education has often presented itself as a universal project. Its language is familiar and, at first glance, difficult to resist. It speaks of progress, rationality, scientific neutrality, efficiency, standardized achievement, and global competitiveness. Yet, when these ideals are examined more carefully, it becomes clear that they are not always as neutral as they appear. Nguyen et al. (2009) and Zhang-Yu (2021) show that educational systems shaped by Eurocentric assumptions frequently marginalize indigenous, local, and non-Western knowledge traditions by treating Western historical experience as the implicit measure of intellectual maturity. This problem is not merely curricular. It is epistemological. It concerns whose knowledge is considered valid, whose history is worth teaching, and whose intellectual tradition is allowed to define the meaning of education itself.

In many Muslim societies and in broader Global South contexts, Islamic education has had to negotiate this unequal epistemic terrain. Halim et al. (2012) and Amri (2008) suggest that Islamic educational thought is often placed in a secondary position when compared with Western-derived educational theories. It is sometimes appreciated as a source of moral values, religious identity, or cultural continuity, but less often treated as a serious framework for knowledge production, social analysis, and educational reconstruction. This is a subtle but consequential reduction. When Islamic education is understood only as the transmission of religious content, its deeper intellectual resources are easily overlooked. One may reasonably ask whether Islamic education has been judged too quickly, or perhaps too narrowly, by standards that do not fully recognize its own epistemological foundations.

The dominance of Eurocentric educational paradigms can be seen in several interrelated tendencies. Daun (2021) and Daun (2024) describe how modern education frequently privileges standardized assessment, secularized rationality, technocratic planning, and measurable achievement. These elements are not inherently problematic. Indeed, some of them have contributed to institutional quality and educational accountability. The difficulty arises when they become the only legitimate grammar of education. Under such conditions, forms of knowledge rooted in revelation, ethical cultivation, communal memory, spiritual discipline, local wisdom, and historical consciousness are often pushed to the margins. Education then becomes less a process of human formation and more a system for producing measurable outputs. This is where the decolonial question becomes unavoidable.

Decolonizing education, in this article, does not mean a simple rejection of Western educational thought. Such a reaction would be intellectually weak and, frankly, unnecessary. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) argue that decolonial work requires a more careful reconstruction of knowledge, one that challenges epistemic domination while opening space for plural and situated ways of knowing. In Islamic education, this means asking how Muslim intellectual traditions can participate not as decorative supplements, but as generative sources of theory. It also means recognizing that the Islamic tradition has its own concepts of knowledge, human development, social order, moral responsibility, and civilizational renewal. These concepts do not need to be forced into Western categories before they can become educationally meaningful.

Within this broader concern, Ibn Khaldun's *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* offers a particularly important point of departure. Dhaouadi (1990), Halim et al. (2012), and Tahir and Nori (2023) describe *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* as a science of civilization that examines the dynamic relationship between human beings, society, power, economy, history, nature, and divine order. It is not merely a historical theory about the rise and fall of states. Nor is it only an early form of sociology, although it clearly anticipates several concerns of modern social science. More profoundly, it is a way of thinking about human collective life as morally charged, historically conditioned, and socially structured. This makes it highly relevant for Islamic education, especially if education is understood not simply as schooling, but as the formation of persons and communities within a larger civilizational horizon.

One of the most significant contributions of *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* lies in its refusal to separate knowledge from social reality. Ahmad (2003) and Razak et al. (2020) indicate that Ibn Khaldun's epistemology combines rational inquiry, empirical observation, historical reflection, and Islamic metaphysical orientation. This combination matters. It suggests that knowledge is neither purely abstract nor merely technical. It is produced within human societies, shaped by historical conditions, and accountable to ethical and spiritual meanings. For Islamic education, this insight is valuable because it allows educational theory to move beyond the familiar binary between religious tradition and modern science. Ibn Khaldun helps us see that a serious Islamic educational framework can be rational without becoming secular reductionist, empirical without becoming materialist, and socially engaged without losing its metaphysical grounding.

Nevertheless, the educational relevance of Ibn Khaldun remains underdeveloped. Alatas (2013) and Alatas (2014) have shown the importance of Ibn Khaldun for sociology and social theory, while Pribadi (2014) also points to his significance for understanding Muslim societies. Yet his thought has not been sufficiently elaborated as a decolonial foundation for Islamic educational theory. Much of the existing discussion still treats Ibn Khaldun as a classical thinker whose ideas are historically impressive but not always pedagogically operational. This creates a research gap. If *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* contains a sophisticated account of society, knowledge, morality, historical change, and civilizational formation, then it is reasonable to ask why it has not been more systematically used to reconstruct the epistemological foundations of Islamic education.

This gap becomes more urgent when contemporary Islamic education is viewed against the pressures of globalization, secular knowledge regimes, and imported educational models. Mirza (2024) and R'boul and Barnawi (2025) suggest that decolonial Islamic education must cultivate critical consciousness, epistemic freedom, and the ability to question inherited hierarchies of knowledge. Ibn Khaldun's framework can contribute to this task because it situates education within the movement of civilization, the formation of collective solidarity, and the ethical responsibility of human beings. His concept of *ʿasabiyyah*, often translated as group solidarity or social cohesion, is especially relevant here. It invites educators to think about how schools, madrasahs, pesantren, universities, and other educational institutions shape not only individual achievement, but also communal resilience and moral responsibility.

This article therefore aims to analyze Ibn Khaldun's *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* as a critical alternative to Eurocentric educational paradigms and to propose its relevance for reconstructing contemporary Islamic education. The central argument is that *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* should be read not only as a classical theory of civilization, but also as an epistemological and pedagogical framework. It enables Islamic education to recover its intellectual depth while engaging modern educational challenges in a more confident and critical manner. The purpose is not to romanticize the past. Rather, it is to ask how a classical Islamic framework

may still illuminate present educational problems that modern technocratic models often fail to address.

This article is guided by three main questions. How can Ibn Khaldun's *'Ilm al-'Umran* be understood as an epistemological framework for Islamic education. In what ways does *'Ilm al-'Umran* challenge Eurocentric educational paradigms. And how can Ibn Khaldun's civilizational thought contribute to decolonizing contemporary Islamic education. These questions are deliberately theoretical, but they also carry practical implications. They invite a reconsideration of curriculum, pedagogy, teacher formation, social cohesion, and the wider purpose of Islamic education in a world still marked by epistemic inequality.

Literature Review

Ibn Khaldun's 'Ilm al-'Umran and Islamic Civilizational Thought

Ibn Khaldun's *'Ilm al-'Umran* occupies a distinctive place in Islamic intellectual history because it does not examine human society as a collection of isolated events, moral prescriptions, or political episodes. It offers, instead, a broad civilizational framework for understanding how human beings live together, build institutions, organize power, produce knowledge, experience decline, and seek renewal. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012) read Ibn Khaldun's thought as an attempt to explain civilization through patterns of social cohesion, political authority, economic life, and historical transformation. This point is important because it suggests that Ibn Khaldun was not merely interested in recording history. He wanted to understand why history moves as it does.

The term *'umran* itself is not easy to translate. Chabane (2008) and Abou-Tabickh (2022) show that different translations, such as civilization, social organization, settlement, or urbanization, carry different conceptual consequences. If *'umran* is translated narrowly as urbanization, its educational meaning may become limited to material development or social organization. If it is understood more broadly as civilization, it opens a wider horizon that includes ethics, knowledge, social solidarity, political order, culture, and spiritual orientation. This is not a minor linguistic issue. Translation, in this case, shapes the way a classical Islamic concept can be brought into contemporary educational theory.

At the heart of *'Ilm al-'Umran* lies the idea that society is dynamic. Ibn Khaldun does not imagine civilization as a fixed structure, but as a living process shaped by interaction among human agency, natural conditions, moral discipline, economic production, political leadership, and divine law. Tahir and Nori (2023) and Arenas et al. (2023) emphasize that Ibn Khaldun's view of civilization is cyclical, meaning that societies rise, consolidate, weaken, and decline through identifiable patterns. This cyclical view challenges the linear assumptions often found in modern theories of progress. It reminds us, perhaps rather uncomfortably, that no civilization is permanently secure merely because it has institutions, wealth, or power.

The concept of *'asabiyyah* is especially central in this framework. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012) explain *'asabiyyah* as group solidarity, collective cohesion, or the social bond that enables communities to act with shared purpose. In educational terms, this concept is rich. It suggests that education is not only about individual achievement, intellectual competence, or career mobility. Education also forms the moral and social fabric that allows a community to survive, cooperate, and pursue common goods. One may disagree with some historical applications of *'asabiyyah*, of course, but its analytical value cannot be ignored.

Ibn Khaldun's epistemology is also significant for Islamic education. Ahmad (2003) and Razak et al. (2020) describe his intellectual method as a combination of empirical observation, rational analysis, historical criticism, and Islamic metaphysical awareness. This combination is striking because it resists two extremes at once. It does not reduce knowledge to abstract speculation detached from social reality. Yet it also does not reduce knowledge to material facts without ethical or spiritual meaning. For this reason, *‘Ilm al-‘Umran* can help contemporary Islamic education rethink the relationship between revelation, reason, experience, and society in a more integrated way.

In this sense, Ibn Khaldun's thought may be read as an early model of interdisciplinary reasoning. Alatas (2013) and Alatas (2014) have argued that Ibn Khaldun's work anticipates important concerns in sociology, political theory, economics, anthropology, and historical analysis. Still, to call him merely a precursor of modern social science may be too narrow. Such a label can unintentionally force his thought into categories produced by a later Western academic tradition. A more balanced reading would recognize that Ibn Khaldun developed a civilizational science from within an Islamic intellectual universe, even though some of its analytical tools remain highly relevant to modern social inquiry.

For Islamic education, this civilizational orientation is deeply valuable. It allows education to be understood not only as the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, but as the formation of human beings within a historical, ethical, social, and spiritual order. This is where Ibn Khaldun becomes more than a historical figure. He becomes a conceptual resource. His thought encourages Islamic education to ask larger questions about the kind of human being, society, and civilization that education seeks to form.

Eurocentric Educational Paradigms and the Problem of Epistemic Domination

Eurocentric educational paradigms are not simply educational models developed in Europe or the West. The problem is more subtle than geographical origin. Nguyen et al. (2009) and Van Nieuwenhuyse (2020) suggest that Eurocentrism becomes problematic when Western historical experiences, philosophical assumptions, and institutional models are treated as universal standards for all societies. In education, this often means that Western ways of knowing become the default measure of what counts as scientific, rational, modern, and progressive. Other knowledge traditions may still be tolerated, but often only as cultural heritage, moral instruction, or local wisdom, not as serious sources of theory.

This epistemic hierarchy has shaped curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and educational policy in many postcolonial societies. Zhang-Yu (2021) and Dagar and Khurshid (2024) show that Eurocentric curricula often marginalize non-Western histories and perspectives, thereby affecting learners' sense of identity, cultural memory, and intellectual belonging. The issue is not only that some local materials are omitted from textbooks. The deeper issue is that students may gradually learn to see their own intellectual traditions as less advanced, less scientific, or less relevant to modern life. This is how epistemic domination works. It enters quietly through categories, standards, and assumptions.

Modern education's emphasis on standardization further intensifies this problem. Daun (2021) and Daun (2024) note that contemporary educational systems frequently prioritize measurable outcomes, institutional efficiency, cognitive performance, and comparative ranking. These features may serve legitimate administrative purposes. No serious education system can completely ignore quality assurance, evaluation, or measurable learning outcomes. Yet, when such mechanisms become dominant, education risks losing its ethical, spiritual, historical, and communal dimensions. The learner becomes a unit of performance. The teacher becomes a delivery agent. The curriculum becomes a package of competencies. Something important is lost, even if the system appears efficient.

In Muslim societies, the impact of this paradigm is particularly complex. Islamic education is often expected to preserve religious identity while simultaneously adapting to global educational standards. Halim et al. (2012) and Amri (2008) indicate that this tension has led Islamic educational institutions to negotiate between inherited traditions and modern institutional demands. This negotiation is not inherently negative. Adaptation is necessary. The difficulty appears when adaptation turns into epistemic dependency, when Islamic education begins to measure its own legitimacy almost entirely through externally imposed categories.

Eurocentric paradigms also tend to separate knowledge from metaphysical and moral foundations. This separation has deeply influenced modern educational thought. Although secular rationality has enabled certain forms of scientific development, it has also narrowed the meaning of knowledge in many educational settings. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) argue that decolonial approaches must question the assumption that Western secular epistemology is the only valid framework for modern education. For Islamic education, this critique is especially important because Islamic knowledge traditions do not treat knowledge as morally neutral. Knowledge is always connected to responsibility, adab, justice, worship, and human accountability before God.

It would be unfair, however, to describe all Western educational thought as oppressive or intellectually empty. Some Western traditions have contributed meaningfully to critical pedagogy, democratic education, child development, and educational justice. The problem lies not in the existence of Western theories, but in their universalization. When a particular historical tradition presents itself as the neutral center of world knowledge, other traditions are made peripheral. This is precisely what decolonial critique seeks to challenge. It asks education to become intellectually plural, historically honest, and ethically accountable.

From this perspective, the decolonization of Islamic education requires more than inserting Islamic content into an otherwise Eurocentric structure. It requires a deeper reconsideration of epistemology. What is knowledge. What is the human being. What is society. What is the purpose of education. These questions are not merely philosophical ornaments. They shape curriculum, pedagogy, teacher formation, institutional policy, and the moral imagination of students. Without asking these questions, Islamic education may remain trapped in a borrowed architecture, even when its surface language appears religious.

Decolonial Education and Islamic Epistemological Reconstruction

Decolonial education begins from the recognition that colonialism was not only a political and economic project. It was also an epistemic project. It shaped what societies were taught to know, value, remember, forget, and aspire to become. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) argue that decolonial education must therefore challenge the dominance of external epistemic frameworks while restoring the legitimacy of local and indigenous knowledge systems. In Islamic contexts, this task must include the recovery and reconstruction of Islamic epistemology as a living source of educational theory.

Islamic epistemological reconstruction does not mean returning nostalgically to the past. That would be too simple, and perhaps not very useful. Rather, it means re-engaging classical Islamic intellectual resources in conversation with contemporary educational problems. Mirza (2024) suggests that decolonial Islamic education should cultivate critical consciousness and epistemic freedom, enabling learners to recognize the historical and ideological forces that shape knowledge. This is where Ibn Khaldun becomes particularly relevant. His work offers tools for understanding society historically, critically, and ethically, without abandoning the metaphysical foundations of Islam.

A decolonial Islamic educational framework must also be careful not to reproduce a rigid opposition between tradition and modernity. Ahmed and Chowdhury (2025) and Lopez and Singh (2024) indicate that contemporary decolonial debates increasingly recognize hybridity, contextuality, and intellectual plurality. For Islamic education, this means that classical concepts such as *‘ilm*, *adab*, *hikmah*, *tarbiyah*, and *‘umran* should not be treated as museum objects. They need to be interpreted, tested, expanded, and sometimes even questioned in relation to present realities. This process is demanding. But it is also necessary if Islamic education is to become intellectually generative rather than merely preservative.

Ibn Khaldun’s *‘Ilm al-‘Umran* can contribute to this reconstruction by offering a civilizational lens. Unlike approaches that view education mainly through psychology, curriculum design, or institutional management, a Khaldunian approach situates education within the broader life of society. Adiyono and Sholeh (2025) show that concepts related to social cohesion can be operationalized in educational practice through community-oriented and value-based learning. This is important because decolonial education is not only about changing content. It is also about rebuilding the social and moral relations through which knowledge is transmitted and lived.

The role of local epistemologies should also be emphasized. Suroyo et al. (2026) and Witriani et al. (2024) suggest that local Islamic educational traditions, including embodied, poetic, aesthetic, and communal forms of knowledge, can enrich educational theory beyond formal textualism and abstract rationalism. This insight is valuable because Islamic civilization has never been intellectually uniform. It has always developed through interaction among revelation, reason, language, culture, law, spirituality, and locality. A decolonial Islamic education should therefore be attentive not only to canonical texts, but also to lived traditions and local forms of wisdom.

In practical terms, Islamic epistemological reconstruction requires a shift in how curriculum and pedagogy are imagined. Ahn and Juraev (2025) and Mardatillah et al. (2025) point to the possibility of linking Ibn Khaldun’s ideas with child-centered learning, ethical formation, and reflective pedagogy. This does not mean forcing Ibn Khaldun into modern educational terminology. It means allowing his concepts to illuminate contemporary concerns, including critical thinking, moral agency, social responsibility, and historical awareness. The result may not be a perfectly neat model. But perhaps that is acceptable. Living educational traditions rarely develop in perfectly symmetrical ways.

The literature, therefore, points to both promise and limitation. On the one hand, Ibn Khaldun’s *‘Ilm al-‘Umran* provides a rich framework for rethinking Islamic education beyond Eurocentric assumptions. On the other hand, existing studies have not yet developed a comprehensive pedagogical model that connects his civilizational thought with curriculum design, teacher formation, classroom practice, and institutional reform. This is the space in which the present article intervenes. It argues that a Khaldunian approach can help Islamic education move from defensive preservation toward critical reconstruction, from borrowed categories toward epistemic confidence, and from fragmented reform toward civilizational renewal.

Method

This study employs a qualitative library-based research design with a conceptual-critical and hermeneutical approach. It does not seek to generate empirical field data, nor does it attempt to measure educational outcomes through statistical procedures. Its main concern is theoretical and interpretive. More specifically, the study examines how Ibn

Khaldun's *'Ilm al-'Umran* may be reconstructed as an epistemological and pedagogical framework for decolonizing Islamic education. This choice of method is appropriate because the article deals primarily with concepts, intellectual traditions, and paradigmatic assumptions rather than with classroom observation, survey data, or experimental intervention.

The primary intellectual material of this study is Ibn Khaldun's concept of *'Ilm al-'Umran*, especially as it relates to *'umran*, *'asabiyyah*, civilization, history, social change, knowledge, and human collective life. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012) provide an important basis for reading Ibn Khaldun's theory of civilization as a dynamic account of social cohesion, political authority, and historical transformation. In this article, these concepts are not treated merely as historical categories. They are read as living analytical resources that may still illuminate contemporary educational problems, particularly those related to epistemic dependency, curriculum alienation, and the marginalization of Islamic intellectual traditions.

The secondary body of literature consists of contemporary studies on Islamic education, decolonial education, Eurocentrism, curriculum reform, and epistemic justice. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) are especially useful for framing the problem of decolonial education in Muslim and Global South contexts, while Nguyen et al. (2009) and Zhang-Yu (2021) help clarify how Eurocentric educational paradigms marginalize non-Western knowledge systems. These works are not used simply as supporting references. They function as dialogical partners through which Ibn Khaldun's thought can be placed in conversation with present debates on educational reconstruction. It is here, perhaps, that the method becomes slightly more demanding, because the article must avoid both uncritical traditionalism and uncritical adoption of modern decolonial vocabulary.

The analysis proceeds through interpretive reading, thematic synthesis, and critical comparison. Interpretive reading is used to identify the conceptual meaning of key Khaldunian terms, especially *'umran* and *'asabiyyah*, while remaining attentive to their historical, linguistic, and philosophical complexity. Chabane (2008) and Abou-Tabickh (2022) show that the translation of *'umran* into terms such as civilization, settlement, or urbanization is not a neutral technical choice. It shapes how Ibn Khaldun's thought may be understood and applied in contemporary educational discourse. For this reason, the study treats translation and interpretation as part of the methodological process, not as a secondary linguistic issue.

Thematic synthesis is then used to organize the literature into several recurring themes, including Islamic epistemology, civilizational consciousness, social cohesion, critique of Eurocentrism, and decolonial reconstruction. This stage allows the study to move beyond scattered textual commentary and toward a more coherent theoretical argument. Ahmad (2003) and Razak et al. (2020) are helpful in showing that Ibn Khaldun's epistemology combines rational inquiry, empirical observation, historical awareness, and Islamic metaphysical orientation. These themes are synthesized in order to demonstrate that *'Ilm al-'Umran* can contribute to Islamic education not only as a historical legacy, but also as a framework for thinking about knowledge, society, and human formation.

Critical comparison is used to examine the contrast between Khaldunian civilizational reasoning and Eurocentric educational paradigms. This comparison does not assume that all Western educational thought is inherently invalid. That would be too simplistic. Rather, it questions the universalization of Western models of rationality, secular knowledge, standardized assessment, and linear progress. Daun (2021) and Daun (2024) help identify how modern educational systems often privilege measurable achievement and institutional

efficiency, while Ibn Khaldun's framework invites attention to ethical formation, social cohesion, historical consciousness, and the civilizational meaning of education. The comparison is therefore analytical rather than polemical.

The methodological aim of this article is to construct a conceptual framework rather than to offer a finalized pedagogical model. The study proceeds through three broad movements. It first identifies the epistemological foundations of *‘Ilm al-‘Umran*. It then examines the limitations of Eurocentric educational paradigms in relation to Islamic and local epistemologies. Finally, it formulates a Khaldunian framework for decolonial Islamic education by linking civilizational thought, critical consciousness, social solidarity, and curriculum reconstruction. Admittedly, such a framework remains theoretical at this stage. Yet this theoretical work is necessary, because educational reform without epistemological clarification often ends up borrowing the very assumptions it claims to challenge.

Results and Discussion

Reframing ‘Ilm al-‘Umran as a Decolonial Epistemology of Islamic Education

To read Ibn Khaldun's *‘Ilm al-‘Umran* merely as a theory of civilization is, in many respects, to reduce the depth of his intellectual project. It is true that his work explains the rise and decline of societies, the formation of political authority, the role of economic life, and the dynamics of social cohesion. Yet beneath these themes lies something more fundamental. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012) show that *‘Ilm al-‘Umran* offers a way of understanding human collective life through the interaction of history, society, morality, power, and divine order. This makes it possible to read Ibn Khaldun not only as a historian or social theorist, but also as a thinker whose ideas may contribute to the epistemological reconstruction of Islamic education.

The term epistemology refers to a theory of knowledge, especially to questions about what knowledge is, how it is acquired, who has the authority to define it, and for what purposes it is used. In Islamic education, this question is not a marginal issue. It is central. If education is shaped only by imported categories of rationality, secular knowledge, and standardized performance, then Islamic education may continue to exist institutionally while gradually losing its deeper intellectual orientation. Razak et al. (2020) and Ahmad (2003) indicate that Ibn Khaldun's thought brings together revelation, reason, empirical observation, and historical analysis. This integration is important because it challenges the modern tendency to separate knowledge into isolated domains, as though religious meaning, social reality, moral responsibility, and empirical inquiry belong to unrelated worlds.

In Ibn Khaldun's framework, knowledge is never detached from society. It emerges within the movement of civilizational life. This may sound simple, but its implications are quite serious. A society does not produce knowledge in a vacuum. It produces knowledge through its institutions, habits, conflicts, authorities, memories, and moral aspirations. Alatas (2013) and Alatas (2014) have emphasized Ibn Khaldun's importance for social theory precisely because he understood knowledge as connected to historical and social conditions. For Islamic education, this means that curriculum cannot be understood merely as a list of subjects. It is also a reflection of the kind of society that education imagines, legitimizes, and helps to form.

This point is especially relevant in the context of decolonial education. Eurocentric educational paradigms often present their own assumptions as universal and neutral. Nguyen et al. (2009) and Zhang-Yu (2021) show that such paradigms can marginalize local and non-Western knowledge systems by positioning them as cultural, traditional, or supplementary

rather than theoretical and foundational. Ibn Khaldun's *'Ilm al-'Umran* offers a different possibility. It allows Islamic education to speak from within its own intellectual inheritance while still engaging critically with modern knowledge. In this sense, *'Ilm al-'Umran* is not an escape from modernity. It is a way of entering modern debates with a stronger epistemic self-awareness.

One of the distinctive strengths of Ibn Khaldun's epistemology is its balance between empirical realism and metaphysical orientation. He observes social facts, historical patterns, political behavior, economic change, and collective solidarity, but he does not treat these realities as morally empty. Ahmad (2003) presents Ibn Khaldun's approach as rational and empirical, while Razak et al. (2020) draw attention to its grounding in Islamic metaphysics. This combination is valuable for Islamic education because it refuses two reductions at once. It refuses to reduce education to spiritual instruction without social analysis. It also refuses to reduce education to technical competence without moral and metaphysical meaning. Perhaps this is one reason why Ibn Khaldun still feels intellectually alive. He does not ask us to choose too quickly between faith and reason, or between tradition and inquiry.

A Khaldunian epistemology also invites Islamic education to recover the social purpose of knowledge. In many modern educational systems, knowledge is increasingly associated with individual achievement, employability, competition, and measurable outcomes. These aims are not necessarily wrong. Students do need competence, institutions do need accountability, and societies do need skilled graduates. Yet something becomes incomplete when education is reduced to performance and productivity. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012), through their readings of *'asabiyyah*, remind us that social cohesion is a central condition of civilizational continuity. From this perspective, Islamic education should cultivate not only intelligent individuals, but also morally responsible members of a community.

The educational meaning of *'asabiyyah* should not be misunderstood as narrow group loyalty or exclusionary identity. In a contemporary educational context, it may be more constructively interpreted as social solidarity, ethical belonging, and collective responsibility. Adiyono and Sholeh (2025) suggest that the principle of social cohesion can be operationalized in educational practice through community-based and value-oriented learning. This insight is useful because it shows that Ibn Khaldun's thought can move beyond abstract theory. It can inform how schools and universities cultivate cooperation, empathy, civic responsibility, and awareness of shared destiny. Is this not one of the forgotten tasks of education today.

Seen from this angle, education is not simply the transmission of information from teacher to student. It is a process of forming historical consciousness. Students need to understand how societies are built, how they decline, how injustice becomes normalized, how knowledge can become dependent, and how communities renew themselves. Tahir and Nori (2023) and Arenas et al. (2023) describe Ibn Khaldun's civilizational theory as dynamic and cyclical. This perspective can help Islamic education avoid a naïve view of progress. It teaches that civilization requires moral discipline, social trust, critical awareness, and institutional responsibility. Without these elements, even highly developed educational systems may become spiritually empty or socially fragile.

This is where the decolonial relevance of *'Ilm al-'Umran* becomes clearer. Decolonizing Islamic education does not only mean adding Islamic content to existing curricula. It requires a deeper rethinking of the assumptions that organize educational knowledge itself. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) argue that decolonial Islamic education must challenge epistemic dependency and create space for Islamic ways of knowing. Ibn Khaldun's framework

contributes to this task by showing that knowledge, society, ethics, and spirituality are not separate domains. They are interwoven dimensions of civilizational life. If education separates them too sharply, it may produce technically capable individuals who lack historical depth, moral imagination, and social responsibility.

A Khaldunian framework therefore challenges the fragmentation of modern educational thought. It questions the separation between knowledge and ethics, between curriculum and society, between pedagogy and civilization, between intellectual formation and spiritual accountability. This does not mean that Islamic education should reject modern disciplines or contemporary pedagogical innovations. Such a rejection would be neither realistic nor desirable. Rather, it means that these disciplines and innovations should be reinterpreted within a broader Islamic and civilizational horizon. According to Mirza (2024), decolonial Islamic education should cultivate critical consciousness and epistemic freedom. Ibn Khaldun helps deepen this project by rooting critical consciousness in historical analysis, social cohesion, and metaphysical meaning.

The implication is that Islamic education needs a more confident epistemological posture. It should not define itself merely by responding to Western paradigms, nor should it isolate itself from global intellectual exchange. A more balanced path is possible. Through *‘Ilm al-‘Umran*, Islamic education can engage modern knowledge critically while recovering its own foundations of meaning. It can affirm empirical inquiry without surrendering to secular reductionism. It can value social sciences without forgetting revelation. It can develop critical pedagogy without losing adab, spirituality, and moral responsibility. This may not solve every educational problem, of course. But it offers a more grounded beginning.

Thus, reframing *‘Ilm al-‘Umran* as a decolonial epistemology allows Ibn Khaldun's thought to become more than a classical reference. It becomes a theoretical resource for reconstructing Islamic education in a world still marked by epistemic inequality. The central insight is relatively clear, although its application will require further work. Knowledge is historical, social, moral, and metaphysical at the same time. Education, therefore, should form learners who are not only informed, but also historically aware, socially responsible, ethically disciplined, and spiritually oriented. In our view, this is precisely where Ibn Khaldun's civilizational reasoning can make a serious contribution to contemporary Islamic educational theory.

Challenging Eurocentric Educational Paradigms through Khaldunian Civilizational Reasoning

The critique of Eurocentric educational paradigms should not be misunderstood as a rejection of every intellectual contribution that has emerged from Western educational thought. Such a rejection would be too reactive, and perhaps intellectually careless. Many Western traditions have contributed meaningfully to educational psychology, critical pedagogy, democratic learning, curriculum studies, and institutional development. The problem lies elsewhere. Nguyen et al. (2009) and Zhang-Yu (2021) show that Eurocentrism becomes epistemically problematic when Western historical experience is universalized as the natural standard of knowledge, progress, rationality, and educational development. In this sense, the issue is not Western knowledge as such, but the claim that Western knowledge alone can define what counts as modern, scientific, and educationally legitimate.

This distinction is important for Islamic education. If the critique is directed merely at the West as a geographical or cultural category, the argument can easily become polemical. But if the critique is directed at epistemic domination, then the discussion becomes more precise. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) argue that decolonial education requires the dismantling of knowledge hierarchies that silence Islamic, indigenous, and local epistemologies. This is

where Ibn Khaldun's *Ilm al-'Umran* becomes relevant. His civilizational reasoning does not simply offer an alternative content to be inserted into the curriculum. It offers a different way of thinking about knowledge, society, history, human beings, and the purpose of education.

At the level of the source of knowledge, Eurocentric educational paradigms often privilege a model of rationality that presents itself as universal, secular, and detached from metaphysical commitments. Daun (2021) and Daun (2024) note that modern education tends to organize knowledge through standardization, measurable outcomes, and institutional rationalization. These tendencies have their uses. It would be unrealistic to deny that educational systems need evaluation, planning, and reliable forms of assessment. Yet the problem appears when this form of rationality becomes the only recognized source of educational truth. By contrast, Ahmad (2003) and Razak et al. (2020) indicate that Ibn Khaldun's framework integrates revelation, reason, historical observation, social experience, and empirical inquiry. Knowledge, in this view, is not less rational because it is metaphysically grounded. It is rational in a broader and more ethically accountable sense.

This broader understanding of knowledge challenges one of the deepest assumptions of Eurocentric modernity, namely that knowledge becomes more objective when it is separated from revelation, ethics, and spiritual orientation. Ibn Khaldun's thought does not accept that separation so easily. His analysis of society is empirical, but not secular in the reductionist sense. He observes political authority, economic production, social solidarity, and historical change, yet he situates these realities within a moral and metaphysical order. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012) demonstrate that *Ilm al-'Umran* understands civilization as a dynamic process shaped by human agency, social cohesion, natural conditions, and divine law. For Islamic education, this means that knowledge should not be reduced to technical information. It should also orient learners toward ethical discernment, historical awareness, and spiritual responsibility.

The contrast is equally visible in the way human beings are understood. Many modern educational systems, especially those influenced by performance-based models, tend to treat the learner primarily as an individual cognitive subject. The student is measured through achievement, competence, productivity, and readiness for economic participation. Again, these are not meaningless concerns. Students do need knowledge, skills, and the capacity to participate in modern life. But something becomes narrow when the human being is understood mainly through cognition and performance. Ibn Khaldun offers a more layered anthropology. Tahir and Nori (2023) and Arenas et al. (2023) present his view of human life as socially embedded, historically situated, morally vulnerable, and civilizationaly formed. In this view, the learner is not merely a mind to be trained, but a moral, social, spiritual, and historical being.

This has direct implications for Islamic education. If students are understood only as individual achievers, then education will naturally prioritize grades, rankings, credentials, and competitiveness. If students are understood as civilizational beings, however, education must also cultivate social responsibility, moral discipline, communal belonging, and awareness of historical continuity. The difference may appear subtle, but it is decisive. A Khaldunian view asks whether education produces only successful individuals, or whether it also forms persons capable of sustaining justice, solidarity, and meaningful collective life. This question cannot be ignored, especially in societies facing cultural fragmentation, moral uncertainty, and epistemic dependency.

The orientation of curriculum also differs sharply. Eurocentric paradigms often assume that a standardized curriculum can function across different societies because knowledge is considered universal and transferable without deep attention to local history, religion,

language, and social structure. Van Nieuwenhuysse (2020) and Dagar and Khurshid (2024) show that such curricular models frequently marginalize non-Western histories and reduce local traditions to peripheral cultural material. In contrast, a Khaldunian-Islamic paradigm views curriculum as historically and socially situated. It does not deny the value of general knowledge, but it asks how knowledge is made meaningful within a particular civilizational context. Curriculum, from this perspective, should be contextual, ethical, civilizational, and socially grounded.

This does not mean that Islamic education should become closed or anti-modern. Quite the opposite. A Khaldunian approach can help Islamic education engage modern knowledge without becoming epistemically dependent on imported models. Alatas (2013) and Alatas (2014) have shown that Ibn Khaldun's work offers a sophisticated social theory that can converse with modern disciplines without losing its own intellectual identity. This is perhaps one of the most useful lessons for contemporary Islamic education. The task is not to imitate Western models in order to appear modern, nor to reject them in order to appear authentic. The task is to develop epistemic self-confidence, where Islamic education can select, critique, adapt, and reconstruct knowledge according to its own philosophical and ethical foundations.

The contrast also appears in pedagogy. Eurocentric educational systems, especially in their technocratic forms, often emphasize cognitive mastery, performance indicators, and standardized learning outcomes. Such pedagogy can become efficient, but not always transformative. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) suggest that decolonial education requires learning processes that cultivate critical consciousness and epistemic freedom. Ibn Khaldun's civilizational reasoning supports this direction because it invites learners to examine historical patterns, social structures, moral causes, and the conditions of civilizational renewal. Pedagogy, then, should not be limited to the transfer of abstract concepts. It should become reflective, dialogic, historical, and community-based.

In practical terms, a Khaldunian pedagogy would encourage students to ask why societies rise and decline, how knowledge becomes dominant or marginalized, how solidarity is built or weakened, and how moral failure affects social life. These are not merely historical questions. They are educational questions. Mirza (2024) argues that Islamic education must cultivate critical consciousness in relation to colonial legacies and epistemic dependency. Ibn Khaldun deepens this project by linking critique to civilizational analysis. Students are not only invited to criticize domination, but also to understand the social and moral conditions required for renewal. This makes the Khaldunian approach more constructive than a purely oppositional decolonial critique.

The aim of education is perhaps the most fundamental point of contrast. Eurocentric paradigms, particularly in their neoliberal and technocratic versions, often define educational success through achievement, productivity, competitiveness, and employability. These aims are understandable in modern societies, but they are insufficient as ultimate educational purposes. Islamic education, when read through Ibn Khaldun, must ask a larger question. What kind of human being and what kind of society should education help to form. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012) make clear that social cohesion, moral discipline, and collective responsibility are central to Ibn Khaldun's understanding of civilization. Education, therefore, should aim at human formation, social cohesion, justice, and civilizational responsibility.

This is where Ibn Khaldun's thought becomes a critical alternative rather than merely an historical reference. It allows Islamic education to move beyond imitation. It gives Islamic education a language for thinking about society, history, knowledge, and moral formation from within its own intellectual tradition. Of course, this does not automatically solve the

institutional problems of Islamic schools, madrasahs, pesantren, or universities. But it does provide a more coherent conceptual basis for reform. Without such a basis, reform often becomes a matter of borrowing external models, translating them into Islamic vocabulary, and assuming that the work is complete. Ibn Khaldun reminds us that genuine educational reconstruction must begin deeper than that.

Toward a Khaldunian Model of Decolonial Islamic Education

A Khaldunian model of decolonial Islamic education should be understood as a conceptual orientation rather than a rigid formula. This distinction matters. If Ibn Khaldun's *‘Ilm al-‘Umran* is turned too quickly into a fixed pedagogical model, its intellectual richness may be flattened. The better approach is to treat it as a framework that can guide epistemological reconstruction, curriculum reform, teacher formation, and the cultivation of civilizational consciousness. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) argue that decolonial Islamic education must create space for Islamic epistemologies to function as sources of theory, not merely as cultural or religious additions. A Khaldunian model responds to this demand by locating education within the broader relationship between knowledge, society, morality, history, and divine order.

Epistemological reconstruction is the first major dimension of this model. Islamic education needs to recognize Islamic knowledge traditions, local wisdom, and contemporary sciences as parts of an integrated intellectual framework. Ahmad (2003) and Razak et al. (2020) show that Ibn Khaldun's epistemology brings together rational inquiry, empirical observation, historical analysis, and Islamic metaphysical grounding. This integration is highly relevant for contemporary Islamic education because many institutions still operate within fragmented knowledge structures. Religious sciences are often placed on one side, modern sciences on another, and local forms of knowledge somewhere at the margins. A Khaldunian approach asks whether this separation is educationally healthy. More importantly, it asks how these forms of knowledge might be brought into a more meaningful conversation.

Such reconstruction does not require the artificial Islamization of every discipline in a superficial way. It requires something more careful. Islamic education should be able to examine the philosophical assumptions of modern knowledge, accept what is beneficial, critique what is reductionist, and enrich it through Islamic ethical and metaphysical insights. This is not an easy task. It requires scholars, curriculum designers, and teachers who are intellectually bilingual, so to speak, capable of understanding both Islamic traditions and contemporary knowledge systems. Yet without this effort, Islamic education may remain divided between inherited religious instruction and borrowed modern frameworks.

The second dimension is historical and civilizational consciousness. Ibn Khaldun's theory of civilization teaches that history is not simply a linear story of progress from tradition to modernity. Tahir and Nori (2023) and Arenas et al. (2023) show that his understanding of civilization is cyclical, dynamic, and morally charged. Societies rise, consolidate, weaken, and decline through patterns that involve solidarity, leadership, justice, wealth, luxury, discipline, and moral responsibility. This insight can help Islamic education challenge the linear Eurocentric narrative in which Western modernity is presented as the final stage of human development. Students should be trained to read history more critically, not as a story of passive imitation, but as a field of moral and civilizational learning.

In educational practice, this means that history should not be taught merely as chronology. It should be taught as reflection. Students need to understand how civilizations produce knowledge, how power shapes memory, how decline occurs, and how renewal becomes possible. This is particularly important in Muslim societies where learners may

inherit both pride in past Islamic civilization and uncertainty about contemporary intellectual dependency. A Khaldunian model can help them avoid two extremes, namely romantic nostalgia and cultural inferiority. It invites them to see history as a source of responsibility. If civilizations can rise and decline, then education must ask what kind of moral and intellectual habits sustain renewal.

The third dimension concerns social cohesion and *'asabiyyah*. Ibn Khaldun's concept of *'asabiyyah* is sometimes read narrowly as tribal solidarity, but in contemporary educational discourse it can be interpreted more constructively as ethical solidarity, social trust, and collective responsibility. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012) identify *'asabiyyah* as a central force in the formation and durability of social life. For Islamic education, this concept is valuable because it shifts attention from individual achievement alone to the social bonds that make communal life possible. It reminds us that education should not only produce competent graduates, but also persons who can live responsibly with others.

Adiyono and Sholeh (2025) suggest that social cohesion can be cultivated through educational practices that emphasize cooperation, shared values, and community engagement. In a Khaldunian model, this may include project-based learning connected to social problems, dialogic learning across differences, service learning, and institutional cultures that nurture trust rather than competition alone. The point is not to suppress individuality. Rather, it is to situate individual growth within a wider moral community. This seems especially urgent in contemporary societies marked by polarization, consumerism, and weakened communal ties. Islamic education cannot remain indifferent to these conditions.

The fourth dimension is critical consciousness. Decolonial Islamic education must encourage students to question epistemic domination, colonial legacies, cultural alienation, and the uncritical adoption of external paradigms. Mirza (2024) argues that Islamic education should cultivate intellectual emancipation and the ability to recognize hidden structures of domination within knowledge. Ibn Khaldun contributes to this aim by providing a method of historical and social analysis. His thought helps students see that ideas do not float above history. They are carried by institutions, political power, economic interests, and civilizational confidence. This is a powerful educational insight.

Critical consciousness, however, should not become mere suspicion. It should not train students only to reject, expose, or denounce. A Khaldunian approach links critique with reconstruction. Students should learn to ask not only what is wrong with inherited or imported systems, but also what forms of knowledge, solidarity, ethics, and leadership are needed for renewal. In this sense, critical consciousness becomes constructive. It forms learners who are capable of questioning domination while also participating in the rebuilding of educational and social life. This balance is important, and perhaps not always easy to maintain.

The fifth dimension is curriculum and pedagogical reform. A curriculum inspired by *Ilm al-'Umran* should integrate Islamic metaphysics, social sciences, ethics, local epistemologies, and dialogic pedagogy. Ahn and Juraev (2025) and Mardatillah et al. (2025) point to the possibility of connecting Ibn Khaldun's thought with child-centered learning, ethical formation, and reflective pedagogy. This integration should not be mechanical. It should be guided by the deeper question of what kind of human formation Islamic education seeks to promote. If the aim is civilizational responsibility, then curriculum must include not only religious content and academic skills, but also historical analysis, social inquiry, moral reasoning, and engagement with lived community realities.

Pedagogically, this requires a shift from passive reception toward reflective and dialogic learning. Students should encounter knowledge as something to be understood,

questioned, related to life, and ethically inhabited. Teachers may use historical cases, social analysis, community observation, classical texts, contemporary issues, and interdisciplinary projects to help students connect knowledge with reality. This is close to Ibn Khaldun's own intellectual habit, which does not separate theory from historical observation. It is also consistent with the decolonial aim of restoring learners' ability to think from their own contexts rather than merely absorbing external categories.

The sixth dimension is teacher formation. A Khaldunian model requires teachers who are more than transmitters of content. Teachers need to function as intellectual mediators, moral exemplars, and agents of epistemic renewal. This is a demanding expectation, but it is difficult to avoid. If Islamic education is to move beyond imitation, teachers must be prepared to understand Islamic intellectual traditions, engage contemporary knowledge, read social realities, and guide students toward ethical and critical reflection. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) emphasize that epistemic freedom in education depends not only on curriculum content, but also on the capacity of educators to challenge inherited hierarchies of knowledge.

Teacher formation should therefore include philosophical training, historical literacy, pedagogical skill, and moral cultivation. Teachers should understand why knowledge is not neutral, how curriculum can reproduce epistemic dependency, and how Islamic concepts can be translated into meaningful educational practice. At the same time, they must avoid turning Islamic education into abstract ideology. Their task is practical as well as intellectual. They work with real students, real institutions, real limitations, and sometimes very ordinary classroom problems. A Khaldunian model should not forget this ordinary reality. The civilizational begins, in many cases, in the classroom.

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that a Khaldunian model of decolonial Islamic education is not simply a return to classical thought. It is a reconstruction of educational purpose through classical resources, contemporary critique, and practical reflection. Ibn Khaldun's *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* offers a way to rethink education as the formation of historically aware, socially responsible, morally grounded, and spiritually oriented human beings. It also helps Islamic education resist epistemic dependency without falling into isolation. This is perhaps its strongest contribution. It gives Islamic education a framework for engaging the modern world critically, but not defensively, and for recovering its own intellectual confidence without closing itself to wider human knowledge.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Ibn Khaldun's *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* offers a significant theoretical foundation for decolonizing Islamic education. Its relevance does not lie only in Ibn Khaldun's historical stature as a classical Muslim thinker, but also in his capacity to provide an alternative epistemological imagination for contemporary education. Nguyen et al. (2009) and Zhang-Yu (2021) show that Eurocentric educational paradigms have shaped modern education through claims of universality, secular rationality, standardization, and epistemic hierarchy. In many Muslim and Global South contexts, these paradigms have often positioned Islamic and local knowledge traditions as supplementary rather than foundational. This is precisely the problem that a Khaldunian reading helps us see more clearly.

Ibn Khaldun's *ʿIlm al-ʿUmran* offers a more holistic way of thinking because it integrates empirical observation, historical consciousness, social cohesion, moral formation, and Islamic metaphysics. Dhaouadi (1990) and Halim et al. (2012) indicate that Ibn Khaldun's civilizational reasoning does not separate knowledge from society, ethics, history, and divine

order. This insight is important for Islamic education because decolonization cannot be reduced to adding Islamic vocabulary or religious content to curricula that remain epistemologically dependent on external paradigms. It requires a more fundamental reconstruction of how education understands knowledge, the human being, society, history, and the purpose of learning itself.

A Khaldunian model of Islamic education can therefore contribute to curriculum reform, teacher education, critical pedagogy, social cohesion, and epistemic justice. R'boul and Barnawi (2025) suggest that decolonial Islamic education must cultivate epistemic freedom and critical consciousness, while Ibn Khaldun's framework deepens this project by rooting it in civilizational analysis and moral responsibility. Future research should move beyond conceptual formulation and examine how Ibn Khaldun-inspired pedagogy can be applied in Islamic schools, universities, pesantren, madrasah, and Muslim higher education institutions. Such empirical work is necessary, not because theory is insufficient, but because educational reconstruction must eventually meet the realities of classrooms, teachers, students, institutions, and communities.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the colleagues for sharing, discussing, and providing their very useful comments to improve the manuscript.

Conflict of Interests

There are no disclosed conflicts of interest for the authors. I attest that the submission is unique and is not already being considered by another publisher.

Ethical Considerations

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