

Başvuru: 21.08.2025

Kabul: 29.09.2025

OnlineFirst: 30.09.2025

DOI: 10.37344/talim.2025.77

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<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/talim>

e-ISSN: 2630-5887

Eylül 2025 • 9(2) • 236-255

The Child and Child Education in the Works of Abdullah b. Fodio*Ifeoluwa Siddiq Oyelami¹***Abstract**

This article examines the concept of the child and the principles of child education in the works of Abdullah b. Fodio (d. 1245/1829), one of the most prominent intellectual figures of the Sokoto Caliphate in which corresponds to present-day northern Nigeria. Although Islamic education in Africa has received considerable scholarly attention, less focus has been directed toward individual thinkers from Bilād al-Sūdān who articulated distinctive educational philosophies have received less focus. Using a qualitative, library-based methodology and a descriptive-analytical approach, this study closely examines Ibn Fodio's writings to explore his views on child's nature, their rights owed to children, the responsibilities of parents and teachers, and the appropriate methods of instruction and discipline. It further examines his view of formal education as a structured process with a specific curriculum. The analysis reveals that Ibn Fodio's educational vision was firmly rooted in the classical Islamic pedagogy. He envisaged child education as developing across three distinct stages—early childhood, the age of discernment, and maturity—each requiring tailored approaches and content. Moreover, he emphasised the balance between affection and corrective discipline, warning against excessive harshness while advocating compassion. Notably, his endorsement of reinforcement, both positive and corrective, bears resemblance to modern social learning theories. The study also looks into Ibn Fodio's perspectives on the balance between play and work, as well as gender bias in education. By appraising these insights, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the concept of education in precolonial Muslim West Africa and recovers the voice of a Muslim African scholar whose ideas retain enduring relevance to contemporary debates on child development and moral education.

Keywords

Islamic Education, Child Education, Social Learning, Bilād al-Sūdān, Abdullah b. Fodio, Sokoto Caliphate, Moral Education

Citation: Oyelami, Ifeoluwa Siddiq. "The Child and Child Education in the Works of Abdullah b. Fodio". *Talim* 9/2 (September 2025), 236-255. <https://doi.org/10.37344/talim.2025.77>

Plagiarism: This article's similarity rate is checked via intihal.net, and its review is carried out by at least two reviewers using the double-blind review principle.

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Abdullah b. Fûdî'nin Eserlerinde Çocuk ve Çocuk Eğitimi

Öz

Bu makale, günümüz Kuzey Nijerya'sına tekabül eden Sokoto Devleti'nin önde gelen alimlerden biri olan Abdullah b. Fûdî'nin (ö. 1245/1829), eserlerinde çocuk kavramını ve çocuk eğitiminin ilkelerini incelemektedir. Afrika'daki İslam eğitimi, araştırmacıların büyük ilgisini çekmiş olmakla birlikte, Biladü's-Sudân'dan çıkan ve kendine özgü eğitim felsefelerini ortaya koyan bireysel düşünürler üzerinde daha az durulmuştur. Dolayısıyla niteliksel, kütüphane temelli (library-based) bir metodoloji ve betimsel-analitik bir yaklaşım kullanan bu çalışma, İbn Fûdî'nin yazılarını yakından inceleyerek çocuğun doğası, çocuklara tanınan haklar, ebeveynlerin ve öğretmenlerin sorumlulukları ile uygun öğretim ve disiplin yöntemleri hakkındaki görüşlerini araştırmaktadır. Ayrıca onun, resmi eğitimi belirli bir müfredata sahip yapılandırılmış bir süreç olarak ele alışını da incelemektedir. Analiz, İbn Fûdî'nin eğitim vizyonunun klasik İslam pedagojisine sıkı sıkıya bağlı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. O, çocuk eğitimi üç aşamada gelişen bir süreç olarak tasavvur etmiştir: erken çocukluk, muhakeme çağı ve olgunluk. Her aşama, kendine özgü yöntemler ve içerikler gerektirmektedir. Ayrıca sevgi ve düzeltici disiplin arasındaki dengeyi vurgulamış; aşırı sertliğe karşı uyarıda bulunurken şefkatli olmayı savunmuştur. Özellikle hem olumlu hem de düzeltici pekiştirmeyi desteklemesi, modern sosyal öğrenme teorileriyle benzerlik göstermektedir. Çalışma ayrıca İbn Fûdî'nin oyun ve çalışma arasındaki dengeye ilişkin görüşlerini ve eğitimde cinsiyet temelli önyargıya yaklaşımını da ele almaktadır. Bu görüşler ışığında, sömürge öncesi Müslüman Batı Afrika'daki eğitim anlayışının daha iyi anlaşılmasını sağlamaktadır. Ayrıca, fikirleri, çocuk gelişimi ve ahlak eğitimi konusundaki güncel tartışmalar açısından hâlâ geçerli olan bir Müslüman Afrikalı âlimin perspektifini görünür kılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

İslam eğitimi, Çocuk eğitimi, Sosyal Öğrenme, Biladü's-Sudân, Abdullah b. Fodio, Sokoto Devleti, Ahlak Eğitimi

Atıf bilgisi: Oyelami, Ifeoluwa Siddiq. "Abdullah b. Fûdî'nin Eserlerinde Çocuk ve Çocuk Eğitimi" *Talim* 9/2 (Eylül 2025), 236-255. <https://doi.org/10.37344/talim.2025.77>

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الطفل وتعليم الطفل في مؤلفات عبد الله بن فودي

ملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة مفهوم الطفل ومبادئ تربيته في مؤلفات عبد الله بن فودي (ت 1245هـ/1829م) أحد أبرز المفكرين في دولة صكوتو الواقعة في شمال نيجيريا الحالية، ورغم أن التربية الإسلامية في إفريقيا قد حظيت باهتمام واسع من الباحثين فإن إسهامات المفكرين الأفراد في بلاد السودان الذين صاغوا فلسفات تربوية مميزة لم تنل القدر نفسه من الدراسة. وبناء على ذلك تعتمد هذه الدراسة منهجية نوعية قائمة على المصادر المكتوبة، ونهجاً وصفيًا تحليليًا لقراءة متأنية لكتابات ابن فودي نستكشف من خلالها تصويره لطبيعة الطفل والحقوق المترتبة له ومسؤوليات الوالدين

والمعلمين والأساليب المناسبة للتعليم والتأديب. كما تسلط الضوء على رؤيته للتعليم النظامي بوصفه عملية منظمة ذات منهج مميز، ومن خلال هذا التحليل يتبين أن التصور التعليمي لدى ابن فودي متجذر بعمق في تقاليد التربية الإسلامية الكلاسيكية فقد رسم ملامح نمو الطفل عبر ثلاث مراحل متميزة: الطفولة المبكرة، وعمر التمييز، ومرحلة التي ما قبل البلوغ. ويتطلب كل منها مناهج ومضامين خاصة. كما شدد على أهمية التوازن بين المودة والرفقة إلى جانب التأديب بما لا يصل إلى القسوة، والجدير بالذكر أن تأييده لاستخدام التعزيز الإيجابي والتصحيحي يقارب يتماشى بشكل كبير مع نظريات التعلم الاجتماعي الحديثة. كما تناقش الدراسة أيضاً آرائه حول العلاقة بين اللعب والعمل فضلاً عن موقفه من التفاوت بين الجنسين في التعليم. ومن خلال هذه المعالجة تساهم الدراسة في فهم راسخ للنظرية التربوية في غرب إفريقيا قبل الاستعمار، وتُعيد إبراز صوت باحثٍ إفريقي مسلم ما تزال أفكاره تحتفظ بقيمة دائمة في النقاشات المعاصرة حول نمو الطفل والتربية الأخلاقية.

الكلمات المفتاحية

التربية الإسلامية، تعليم الأطفال، التعلم الاجتماعي، بلاد السودان، عبد الله بن فودي، دولة صكتو، التربية الأخلاقية

Introduction

Nostalgia, the inquiry into the past to understand or remedy the present, and the development of decolonial or alternative paradigms are all dimensions of critical reflection that have spurred research into pre-colonial African and Islamic educational systems. These two educational traditions have been examined at both regional and individual levels. However, despite the extensive literature on indigenous African education and Islamic education, along with their respective practices and philosophical underpinnings, studies exploring their intersection remain rare.

Many scholars of African education acknowledge that Islamic learning constituted an integral component of African educational systems across various regions prior to the advent of colonial schooling.² However, comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to figures whose intellectual contributions lie at the intersection of these two domains.³ Similarly, researchers in Islamic education, while identifying central and classical figures in their studies,⁴ have often overlooked thinkers from *Bilād al-Sūdān*, the historical designation for present-day sub-Saharan Africa.

In light of this, the present study explores the writings of one of the most prominent 19th-century minds in West Africa: Abdullah b. Fodio (d. 1245/1829), a prolific scholar who wrote over a hundred works on diverse issues facing his region and time, all from an Islamic perspective.⁵ Ibn Fodio lived during a period that was slightly before European explorers entered his territory and several decades before the introduction of missionary and colonial education systems, which later laid the groundwork for modern schooling in the

² See A. Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 50-72; Muhammed Mustapha Gwadabe, 'Colonialism and Desecration of Islamic Studies in Sudanic Africa', *History of Islamic Learning and Scholarship in Africa* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2024), 408; Mhando Mikidady, 'Behaviorism in African Indigenous Learning and Teachings: A Case of Pre-Colonial Education in Tanzania Mainland', *Journal of African Studies and Development*, (2021), 2.

³ It is important to note that some research in this field has highlighted intersections that are predominantly practical and communal in nature, rather than theoretical or personal. For example, at the International Conference on the History of Islamic Learning and Scholarship in Africa held in Kaduna, Nigeria, in June 2023, organised by the IOC in collaboration with Arewa House, many of the proceedings examined Islamic education and scholarship across various regions of West and Central Africa. However, none of the contributions offered an analysis of the educational thought of any Sudanic African scholar. This pattern can likewise be observed in many other similar publications. For proceedings of the conference, see IRCICA, *History of Islamic Learning and Scholarship in Africa* (Istanbul: IRCICA, 2024).

⁴ To mention only a few examples, a substantial body of research exists on Ibn Khaldūn and al-Ghazālī, who dominate this category. Studies have also been devoted to the educational thought of Ibn Sina (d.428/1037), Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) and Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā'a (d. 733/1333), among others. For references to the works on these scholars, see Ibrahim El-Hussari - Fatkhur Roji, 'The Concept of Islamic Education According to Ibn Sina and Ibn Khaldun', *Nazhruna Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 4 (24 July 2021), 320–341; Kübra Kamer Ekici, 'İmam Gazali ve İbn Cema'a'nın din eğitimi anlayışları', *Batman Üniversitesi İslami İlimler Hakemli Dergisi* 2/2 (30 December 2018), 92–100; Azeza al-Manea, 'Educational Views in Ibn Hazm's Thought', *Journal of Thought* 30/4 (1995), 33–59.

⁵ For lists of Abdullah b. Fodio's books see, Hunwick and Murray, BukhariJohn O Hunwick, 'The Fodiawa: (2) 'Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad Fodiyē', *In Arabic Literature of Africa. Volume II: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa* (Leiden/New York/Köln: E.J. Brill, 1995), 86–113; Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London: Longman, 1967); Abdullah Bukhari, 'The Scholarly Pillar of The Sokoto Caliphate and His Scholarly Work', (2011).

region.⁶ Through his writings, we aim to uncover how an African Muslim scholar conceptualised childhood and child education before the arrival of European colonial powers.

Although Ibn Fodio did not author a specific treatise solely dedicated to child education, he devoted substantial portions of some of his works to the rights and upbringing of children. In this case, the duo, *Tahdhīb al-insān min khiṣāl al-shayṭān* and *Maṣāliḥ al-insān al-muta‘alliqa bi-l-adyān wa-l-abdān*, are worth mentioning.⁷ Additionally, numerous references scattered across Ibn Fodio’s vast corpus offer critical insights into his views on childhood and education.

This research adopts a qualitative library-based methodology using a descriptive analytical approach to examine Ibn Fodio’s perspectives on children and their education. By engaging with the texts mentioned above, we seek to reconstruct the educational worldview articulated by the author. Thematic and comparative analysis methods will be employed to extract and interpret Ibn Fodio’s ideas, comparing them with both secular and religious paradigms.

To provide context, the study begins with a brief overview of Ibn Fodio’s life and educational background. This will be followed by an examination of his relevant thoughts on child education, concluding with a critical discussion and key recommendations derived from the findings. This is followed by an analysis of his views on child education, which concludes with a critical discussion and key recommendations derived from the findings.

1. An Overview of the Life and Education of Abdullah b. Fodio

Abdullah b. Fodio was born into a Fulani family in the Hausa state of Gobir in 1180 AH (1766 CE). He would go on to become a renowned scholar and a central figure in the jihad movement led by his elder brother, Uthman b. Fodio (d. 1232/1817). He was raised in a family distinguished for its Islamic scholarship; his father, a respected jurist, was given the epithet *Fūdūye* (later corrupted to *Fodio*), meaning *faqīh* (Islamic jurist), in recognition of his learning.⁸

Like many privileged children with access to Islamic knowledge, Abdullah began his education under the tutelage of his father, learning the Qur’an and basic etiquette,⁹ both as foundational elements of the curriculum for children in that milieu. At the age of thirteen, however, he was entrusted to the care of his elder brother, Uthman, who furthered his instruction in Arabic, various Islamic sciences, and arithmetic (*al-ḥisāb*). Abdullah b. Fodio later referred to the beginning of his tutelage under his brother as a time when he was still a young boy.¹⁰ From this, one can infer the cultural perception that even teenagers were still considered children within their societal context. His statement that “*He taught me al-‘Ishrīniyyāt*¹¹ and

⁶ It is noteworthy that the first European explorer to enter the territories of the Sokoto Caliphate was Hugh Clapperton (d. 1827), who arrived in 1824, before Ibn Fodio died. However, there appears to be no record of any encounter between him and Abdullah b. Fodio, nor any reference to Clapperton in the latter’s writings. By contrast, Clapperton is known to have met Abdullah’s nephew, Sultan Muhammad Bello, in Sokoto.

⁷ It is noteworthy that the chapter on child education in *Tahdhīb al-insān* is a summarised extract from the chapter “*Kitābu riyaḍati al-nafs wa tahdhīb al-akhlāq wa mu‘ālaḡati amrāḡi al-qalb*” of al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*. Cf. Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifa, 1982), 3/72-74.

⁸ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, *The Depository of Texts*, trans. Muhammad Shareef (Sankore’ Institute of Islamic-African Studies International, no date), 8.

⁹ Ibn Fodio, *The Depository of Texts*, 8.

¹⁰ Ibn Fodio, *The Depository of Texts*, 11.

¹¹ *Ishrīniyyāt* (The Twenties), fully titled *Qaṣīdat al-Ishrīniyyāt fī Madḡ Sayyidnā Muḥammad*, is an alternative name for *al-Wasā’il al-Mutaqabbala*, a celebrated panegyric poem in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad composed by Abū Zayd ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Yakhlaftān b. Aḥmad al-Fazāzī (d. 627/1230). The work is called *Ishrīniyyāt* because it is arranged in units of twenty rhymed verses for each letter of the Arabic alphabet.

similar works, as well as syntax and poetry, in the manner you would teach a child,”¹² also demonstrates that there was a precise pedagogical method for child learning present in his upbringing.

In many African contexts, it is not uncommon for children to be placed under the care of older siblings for nurturing.¹³ On the other hand, it is part of the Islamic knowledge heritage in *Bilād al-Sūdān* that students live with scholars for extended periods to acquire knowledge.¹⁴ Abdullah b. Fodio’s life uniquely combined both models: he lived with his elder brother, who also served as his primary teacher. Remarkably, he remained by his brother’s side for fifty years.¹⁵

He accompanied Uthman b. Fodio on visits to scholars from their extended family and region. As a result, he studied under more than twenty scholars, whose names he meticulously listed in his work *Īdā’ al-nuṣūkh mimman akhadhtu ‘anhu min al-shuyūkh*.¹⁶

Growing up in a cosmopolitan region where multiple languages were spoken, Ibn Fodio acquired proficiency not only in his mother tongue, Fulani, but also in Arabic, the language of religious scholarship, and Hausa, the lingua franca of the general populace. Even as a teenager, he had begun composing poetry in both Arabic and Hausa.¹⁷

Towards his middle age, Abdullah became involved in state-building activities. He emerged as a key figure in the jihad movement, serving variously as military commander, provincial governor, and de facto vizier of the emerging Sokoto Caliphate until 1817, when his brother passed away.¹⁸ During this active political period, he authored several works on governance and social issues. In his final years, however, Abdullah b. Fodio shifted focus to composing devotional and religious texts.¹⁹ His works have earned him considerable recognition, particularly in the fields of tafsīr, fiqh and Arabic language. He died on the 1st of Muharram 1245 AH (August 1829 CE).²⁰

2. The Child in the Abdullah b. Fodio’s Thought

The answers to the question of what constitutes a child and who is considered a child have varied significantly across cultures and historical periods. Although Abdullah b. Fodio does not provide a clear definition of a child in his writings; his views on the right to education and nurturing imply that it extends until marriage.²¹ This would make us enquire into what he sees as the point of marriage.

In his commentary on Sūrat al-Nisā’ 4/6, Ibn Fodio refers to debates surrounding the meaning of “reaching marriageable age” (*idhā balaghū al-nikāḥ*). Here, he presents a range of scholarly opinions that place the age of maturity between 15 and 18 years old. According to the Mālikī school of law, to which he adheres, a child is considered to have reached the age of marriage either upon displaying the natural signs of puberty, such as wet dreams or menstruation, or upon reaching the age of 18, even if such signs are absent.²² From

¹² Ibn Fodio, *The Depository of Texts*, 21.

¹³ Cf. Patricia Mawusi Amos, ‘Parenting and Culture – Evidence from Some African Communities’, *Parenting in South American and African Contexts* (IntechOpen, 2013), 69.

¹⁴ Cf. Abdullah Hakim Quick, *Aspects of Islamic Social Intellectual History in Hausaland: ‘Uthman Ibn Fudī, 1774-1804 C.E.* (University of Toronto, Doktora Tezi, 1995), 77-78.

¹⁵ Ibn Fodio, *The Depository of Texts*, 13.

¹⁶ Ibn Fodio, *The Depository of Texts*, 8-22.

¹⁷ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, *Tazayin al-warakāt bi-jam’ ba’ḍ mā-lī min al-abyāt*, critical ed. mar Muhammad Bawyi (Kano: Darul Ummah Publishing Agency, 2018), 40.

¹⁸ Hunwick, ‘The Fodiawa: (2) ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad Fodiyē’, 87; Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, 65-66.

¹⁹ Cf. Paul Naylor, *From Rebels to Rulers: Writing Legitimacy in the Early Sokoto State* (Woodbridge, Suffolk ; Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2021), 143.

²⁰ Hunwick, ‘The Fodiawa: (2) ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad Fodiyē’, 86.

²¹ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, ‘Ḍiyā’ ‘ulūm Al-Dīn’, *Mukhtārāt min mu’allaḥāt shaykh ‘Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra’ Publishing House, 2013), 1/200.

²² Abdullah Ibn Fodio, *Ḍiyā’ al-ta’wīl fī ma’ān al-tanzīl* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Istiqāmah, 1961), 1/164.

this, we can reasonably infer that Ibn Fodio would define a child as a human being from birth until some point before or around the age of 18.

2.1. The Innate Nature of a Child

In the 18th century, when Abdullah b. Fodio himself was a child, and throughout the 19th century, when he became an author addressing various societal issues, including childhood, there existed a diversity of perspectives across the world regarding the essential nature of the child. Europe was beginning to shift away from the theological belief that the child was inherently sinful due to the doctrine of original sin. Influenced by thinkers such as John Locke, the child is believed to be a *tabula rasa* (blank slate), morally neutral and shaped entirely by experience and education.²³

In East Asian philosophical traditions, the beliefs that range from a child being naturally good, evil, or morally neutral might have persisted.²⁴ In many traditional African perspectives, a child is regarded as a delicate being in need of protection, who attains full recognition as a person only through processes of incorporation, including ritualisation, training, and socialisation.²⁵ Yet, some conceptions of the child's nature varied widely and were often shaped by the circumstances of the child's birth. For instance, twins were regarded in some communities as spiritual blessings, while in others, they were feared as omens of evil.²⁶

Abdullah b. Fodio drew extensively on the Islamic tradition to articulate his concept of the child. He relied particularly on al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. With a slight rephrasing, Ibn Fodio describes the child's heart is described as pure (*tāhir*) and free (*khāl*) from all forms of embellishment (*naqsh*),²⁷ suggesting a spiritual fineness unmarred by external influences. He notes that the child naturally inclines towards whatever inclines towards it, indicating an openness and receptivity to influence. Therefore, if a child is habituated to goodness and excellence, and is educated with noble courtesies, then they will organically be raised upon a foundation of virtue and refined behaviour. As a result of such moral cultivation, the child, according to Ibn Fodio, will attain felicity in both this world and the Hereafter.²⁸

Abdullah b. Fodio consistently affirmed the classical Islamic understanding of the child's nature, grounded in the concept of *fiṭrah*, which means the innate disposition towards good and the recognition of divine unity. He echoed the Quranic perspective that all human beings are born upon *fiṭrah*, which he interpreted as being born upon Islam.²⁹ To elaborate, it would mean an inherent inclination toward monotheism and the moral values prescribed by Islamic teachings.

Nevertheless, like many Muslim scholars, Ibn Fodio acknowledged the role of the environment in shaping a child's development. Drawing on prophetic tradition, "*Every child born is born upon the natural disposition of Islam. It is their parents who make them a Jew, a Christian or a Magian*", he emphasised that while children are born with this natural disposition, their upbringing and social environment determine how that

²³ Mary Kellett, 'Images of Childhood and Their Influence on Research', *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*, ed. Alison Clark et al. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), 16.

²⁴ Johannes Brachtendorf, 'Nature and the Value of Learning in Classical Chinese Philosophy and in Augustine—A Comparative Study', *Religions* 14/12 (December 2023), 1–5.

²⁵ Amasa Ndofirepi - Almon Shumba, 'Conceptions of "Child" among Traditional Africans: A Philosophical Purview', *Journal of Human Ecology* 45 (1 March 2014), 241.

²⁶ James Adewumi, 'Twins in West African Culture and Society of the Iron Age', *University of Missouri-Campus Writing Program* (17 March 2014).

²⁷ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, 'Kitāb al-tibyān li-ḥuqūq al-ikhwān', *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Shaykh 'Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra' Publishing House, 2013), 180–187; Abdullah Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān min khiṣāl al-shayṭān*, critical ed. Muhammad Shareef bin Farid (Sankore Institute of Islamic - African Studies International, 2003), 12. Cf. al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 3/72.

²⁸ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 12.

²⁹ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 14; See Ibn Fodio's interpretation of the concept in the context of the al-Rum 30/30, *Diwā' al-Ta'wīl*, 3/214.

disposition is nurtured.³⁰ Scholars have preserved the theological interpretation of *fiṭrah* as “Islam.” Even though this is more accurately described as a metonymic usage, particularly in *tafsīr* and *fiqh* works. However, scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) view it more elaborately, extending beyond its apparent theological significance. As such, *fiṭrah* appears to be a foundational concept for understanding the sources, nature, and grounds of morality. It may thus be conceived as the cognitive and psychological disposition that inclines human beings towards the tenets of Islam, whether understood in theological or moral terms.³¹ Meanwhile, al-Ghazālī maintains that knowledge, including the discernment of right and wrong, is fundamentally acquired.³² This perspective allows for the possibility that the external influences acting upon human faculties may lead a child not only towards sound judgment but also towards error. It is in line with this thought that Abdullah b. Fodio, in several of his works, called upon parents to create positive and morally sound frameworks of socialisation for their children.³³

From this standpoint, Ibn Fodio’s view, representative of the Islamic tradition, neither fully aligns with Locke’s deterministic *tabula rasa* theory, wherein the child has no innate moral predisposition, nor with philosophical positions such as that of Laozi, where education is seen as an imposition upon an otherwise pure nature.³⁴ Rather, in Ibn Fodio’s thought, education is a means of maintaining and reconnecting the child with their inherent goodness and original moral nature.

2.2. The Child in the Family

In *Tahdhīb al-insān*, Abdullah b. Fodio dedicates considerable attention to the training of the human mind and soul before addressing the upbringing of children.³⁵ This book’s structural progression suggests that Ibn Fodio envisions a model in which a parent or teacher must first cultivate personal spiritual and social discipline before they can successfully nurture a child. In this view, the child is welcomed into a moral environment that they are expected to be socialised into.

An examination of Ibn Fodio’s writings reveals that he regards the child as a divine gift bestowed upon the parent. He emphasises that the pursuit of marriage should not be for the mere satisfaction of physical desires, but rather for the noble goal of raising righteous offspring. Aware of the pride that often accompanies parenthood, he cautions against perceiving the increase in children as a means of worldly display.³⁶ Instead, he frames children as a means through which one can attain *Jannah*. In his versified work on the branches of *īmān*, mentioning raising one’s children in righteousness as a branch of *īmān*, Ibn Fodio explicitly calls it a pathway to being granted entry into the lofty (Jannah).³⁷

Drawing on the verse, “O you who believe! Save yourselves and your families from the Fire” (Sūrat al-Taḥrīm 66/6), Ibn Fodio conceptualises the child as a trust (*amānah*) given to the parent. He maintains that a well-nurtured child will attain bliss in this life and the Hereafter, and that both parents and teachers will share in the reward of the child’s success. Conversely, in the case of a neglected child, he warns that the sin and responsibility will fall upon the guardian or caretaker.³⁸ Thus, from the perspective of Abdullah b. Fodio,

³⁰ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 14.

³¹ Kazeem Akeem Olayinka, ‘Ibn Taymiyyah’s Concept of Fitrah and Its Implications for Islamic Moral Thought’ (International Conference on Islamic-Spiritual Psychology in South-East Asia, New Delhi, 2023), 6.

³² Taneli Kukkonen, ‘Al-Ghazālī on Error’, *Islam and Rationality. The Impact of al-Ghazālī*, ed. Frank Griffel (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 5.

³³ See, Ibn Fodio, ‘Kitāb al-tibyān’, 2/183; *al-Fawā'id al-jalīla 'alā al-āyāt al-jamīla*, critical ed. Abdulaliy Abdulhamid, no date, 117.

³⁴ Brachtendorf, ‘Nature and the Value of Learning’, 2.

³⁵ See, Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb Al-Insān*, 6-11.

³⁶ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, ‘Maṣāliḥ al-insān al-muta'alliqa bi-l-adyān wa-l-abdān’, *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Shaykh 'Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra' Publishing House, 2013), 2/127.

³⁷ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, ‘Minan al-mannān li-man arāda shu'ab al-īmān’, *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Shaykh 'Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra' Publishing House, 2013), 3/241.

³⁸ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 14.

the child is not merely a biological or social entity, but a sacred trust from Allah, one that may lead parents either to divine reward or to the punishment of Allah, depending on how that trust is fulfilled.

Abdullah b. Fodio views the child as a being whose rights are protected by Islamic law even before birth—indeed, beginning from the moment of conception, or even earlier. In his work *Maṣāliḥ al-insān*, which explores the welfare of the human being across all stages of life, he begins with childhood as the first stage. He articulates a series of rights that belong to the child from this early point. It is noteworthy that he grounded these rights within the concept of the preservation and honouring of kinship ties (*ṣilat al-raḥim*). Hence, he refers to the dispensation of such rights as strengthening the kinship ties of the child and, otherwise, the severing of such ties.³⁹

He considers the very choice of a spouse as part of the child's rights. He linked this assertion to a Prophetic saying, “Choose (carefully) for your sperm (offspring) just as you choose for your charities” (*Ikhtārū li-nuṭafikum kamā takhtārūna li-ṣadaqātikum*).⁴⁰ Abdullah b. Fodio, in *Kitāb al-tibyān*, notes that one of the ways a man can protect his child from fire is to marry a pious woman.⁴¹ He also adds that the parents' courtship must align with *sharī'ah* principles.⁴² This can be seen as essential to establishing a solid foundation for upholding the family's moral standards during child upbringing. Referring to the prospective groom, Ibn Fodio writes that a man must be mindful of the rights of his future child when selecting a wife. In his words, “His mind must also be in the observance of the ties of kinship for his child while choosing his mother when he becomes a father.”⁴³ That is, the man must already think in terms of family wellbeing and moral responsibility even before marriage, recognising that the future child is implicated in that decision.

During the stage of conception, Ibn Fodio holds that the child's rights must be observed by the mother, particularly by avoiding the consumption of impure or unlawful substances, i.e. pseudo-medical concoctions. He warns that such an act amounts to severing the ties of kinship.⁴⁴ He also advises the father (guardian) to select a trustworthy midwife and inquire about her approach to childbirth.⁴⁵ This is comparable to choosing quality maternity care today. And its emphasis reflects an awareness that complications at this stage can affect the spiritual, cognitive and physical wellness of a child.

In the postnatal stage, Ibn Fodio emphasises that once a child reaches the nursing period, the parents must ensure that the child is breastfed by a righteous woman who consumes only what is halal. He warns that milk derived from haram sources can corrupt the heart and character of the child.⁴⁶

With regard to physical development, Ibn Fodio points out the importance of regulating the child's sleep patterns. He discourages excessive daytime sleep while permitting unrestricted rest at night, aligning with a natural rhythm conducive to healthy growth. Furthermore, he advises against allowing children to sleep on bare surfaces (*al-firāsh al-waṭi'a*) until their limbs have gained sufficient strength. This precaution, he notes, helps prevent the weakening of the body and limbs, thereby safeguarding the child from physical frailty and promoting robust development.⁴⁷

As the child grows, Ibn Fodio emphasises the importance of love and affection. While discussing the rights of the wife, for example, he includes a husband's joy in her child as an expression of marital love, thereby

³⁹ Ibn Fodio, 'Maṣāliḥ al-insān', 2/129.

⁴⁰ Ibn Fodio, 'Maṣāliḥ al-insān', 2/127.

⁴¹ Ibn Fodio, 'Kitāb al-tibyān', 2/183.

⁴² Ibn Fodio, 'Maṣāliḥ al-insān', 2/127.

⁴³ Ibn Fodio, 'Maṣāliḥ al-insān', 2/127.

⁴⁴ Ibn Fodio, 'Maṣāliḥ al-insān', 2/129.

⁴⁵ Ibn Fodio, 'Maṣāliḥ al-insān', 2/129.

⁴⁶ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 12.

⁴⁷ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 13.

linking affection for the child with spousal compassion.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Prophetic traditions have shown that greeting and gifting foster love;⁴⁹ the application of these two *vis-à-vis* children can be seen in the writing of Ibn Fodio. For instance, in *Akhlāq al-Muṣṭafā*, his work on the Prophet's character, he notes that the Prophet used to joke with and greet children.⁵⁰ The Prophet being an example for believers, Ibn Fodio must have expected everyone, especially parents, to follow this model. He also mentions that among the etiquettes of travel is returning home with gifts for one's family, including both wife and children.⁵¹

3. Child Education

There is a prevalent bias among writers and historians of education to classify pre-modern educational systems as merely informal, thereby overlooking the structured nature of pre-colonial African education. Mikidady challenges this view, arguing that the absence of paperwork, buildings, or certificates does not negate the formal nature of traditional learning, particularly when it involves progression in learning.⁵² This argument is especially relevant to what may be termed Islamic education in the milieu of the Fodios, which clearly featured progressive stages, standard texts, and well-defined subjects. Therefore, in examining Ibn Fodio's views on child education, we will adopt two categories: moral education, which may be considered informal and spans the entirety of life, and formal education, which possesses its own curriculum and structure.

3.1. Moral Education

In the pre-colonial era, particularly in Islamic societies, moral education was central to the concept of being educated. An "educated" individual was not merely one proficient in literacy or religious knowledge, but one whose character was refined and grounded in ethical integrity. Thus, Abdullah b. Fodio interpreted morality through the lens of Islamic teachings, emphasising the importance of spiritual cultivation from early childhood.

Taking cues from the verse, "*O you who believe, protect yourselves and your families from the Fire*" (al-Taḥrīm 66/6), Ibn Fodio articulates the parental duty in terms of both religious and moral instruction. In his words, the education of a child is a debt owed to Allah. If one fulfils it, they are compensated with a lofty position (in Jannah).⁵³ He reasons that if it is incumbent upon a parent to shield their child from physical harm, such as terrestrial fire, then it is even more imperative to protect the child from the eternal punishment of the Hereafter. Hence, he outlines four principles by which this protection is achieved:

1. Instructing the child in excellent character,
2. Safeguarding them from corrupt companions,
3. Discouraging habits of luxury and over-adornment (especially in boys), and
4. Preventing the normalisation of indulgent lifestyles.

While Ibn Fodio does not employ modern developmental terminology, his writing clearly delineates stages of childhood education. Based on his structure in *Tahdhīb al-insān*, one can infer that he envisions three educational phases in child development. Here, Abdullah b. Fodio employs al-Ghazālī's terminology and ideas to describe the phases he envisages.⁵⁴ After he spoke of the initial lessons a child takes, he then states,

⁴⁸ Ibn Fodio, 'Kitāb al-tibyān', 2/185.

⁴⁹ Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, critical ed. Muḥammad Fu'ād 'Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Salafiyya, 1989), "Qabūl al-Hadiyya", 269 (no.594); "Ifshā' al-Salām", 447 (no.980).

⁵⁰ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, 'Akhlāq al-Muṣṭafā', *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Shaykh 'Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra' Publishing House, 2013), for joking see, 2/204; for greeting see, 2/205.

⁵¹ Ibn Fodio, 'Diyā' 'ulūm al-Dīn', 1/201.

⁵² Mhando Mikidady, 'Behaviorism in African Indigenous Learning and Teachings: A Case of Pre-Colonial Education in Tanzania Mainland', *Journal of African Studies and Development*, (2021), 3.

⁵³ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, 'Shukr al-Iḥsān 'alā minan al-mannān li-man arāda shu'ab al-īmān', *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Shaykh 'Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra' Publishing House, 2013), 1/315.

⁵⁴ Cf. al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 3/72-74.

“when he reaches the age of discernment” (*wa mahmā balagha al-tamyīz*) and later mentions “when he is nearing puberty/maturity” (*wa mahmā qāraba al-bulūgh*).⁵⁵ Thus, we have the early childhood, the age of discernment (*tamyīz*), and the threshold of maturity (*bulūgh*). Based on prophetic traditions, *tamyīz* is generally understood to begin at age seven.⁵⁶ The *bulūgh* is marked either by physical signs of puberty or, in the absence of these, by age 18, as per the Mālikī legal school. Thus, we can understand Ibn Fodio’s last category of childhood as teenage.

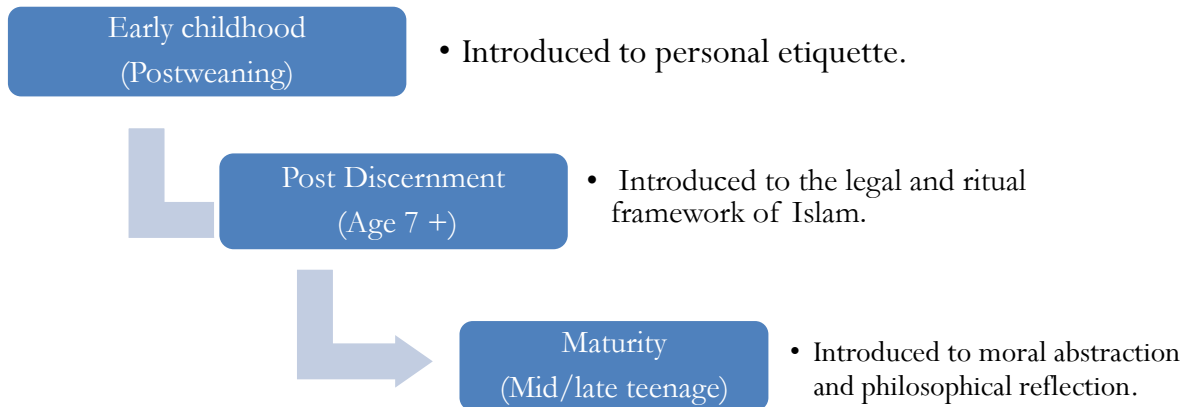


Figure 1: The Progression of Moral Education in Abdullah b. Fodio’s Thought

In the first stage, Ibn Fodio emphasises teaching personal etiquette (*ādāb*), starting with eating, as he observes that the first passion to awaken in a child is for food. Other areas include etiquette in dressing, sleeping, and expressing respect.⁵⁷ He then expands to interpersonal behaviour, with particular attention to peer relationships. A child, he states, must be taught humility, contentment, and generosity. He warns against boastfulness and advises parents to instil in the child the virtue of giving rather than receiving. As he states, “The parent should prevent the child from begging from other children for their possessions. In addition, the parent should teach the child that honour is in giving, not in receiving.”⁵⁸

This guidance is particularly relevant given the irony that, a century later, some in Northern Nigeria, Ibn Fodio’s political constituency, have normalised child begging under the guise of Qur’anic study. Some local scholars therein have even framed this practice as a lesson in humility.⁵⁹ However, this is in contradiction with what is presented in Ibn Fodio’s writings and the broader Islamic ethic of dignity and self-sufficiency.

Additionally, proper behaviour in public settings is emphasised. Children at the early stage should be introduced to how to behave in assemblies: to listen attentively, refrain from speaking out of turn, and avoid disrupting gatherings with play or noise.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 13.

⁵⁶ Cf. İbrahim Kâfi Dönmez, ‘Temyiz’, *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2011), 438.

⁵⁷ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 12-13.

⁵⁸ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 13., Cf. ‘Diyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn’, 1/200.

⁵⁹ Abubakar Gumi, *Where I Stand* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1992), 10.

⁶⁰ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 13.

The second stage, beginning at the age of discernment, initiates the child into the legal and ritual framework of Islam. Instruction includes purification, prayer, observance of legal boundaries, and ethical prohibitions such as lying, stealing, and using obscene language.⁶¹

The third and final stage, approaching puberty, marks the shift toward moral abstraction and philosophical reflection. At this point, the child is taught to understand food not merely as sustenance, but as a means to strengthen oneself for worship. The child is also reminded of the temporality of the world and the certainty of death. Ibn Fodio asserts that youth should learn to see the material world as a place of spiritual preparation, where true intelligence lies in investing in the Hereafter.

Ibn Fodio concludes that the goal of this moral education is to elevate the child “until his rank becomes immense with Allah in the Gardens of Paradise” (*ḥattā taʿẓuma darajatuḥu ʿinda Allāhi fī al-jannān*). Meanwhile, he warns that neglecting this moral formation results in a child who becomes inclined toward frivolity, obscenity, idleness, indulgence in improper foods and clothing, and excessive adornment and boastfulness. Such tendencies render the heart unreceptive to the Truth, creating a hardened barrier, “like a high wall of dry earth”, that obstructs all paths leading to scrupulous uprightness.⁶²

3.2. Formal Education

In pre-colonial Northern Nigeria, one may not find a purpose-built institution exclusively for learning in the sense of the modern “school.” This, however, does not imply the absence of structured educational spaces. Instruction took in places like mosques and teachers’ verandas.⁶³ These venues are collectively referred to as *madāris* (plural of the Arabic noun of place, *madrasah*, meaning “a place where a lesson (*dars*) occurs”). In the thought of Abdullah b. Fodio, establishing such a venue constituted an innovation (*muḥdatha*) that is commendable.⁶⁴ During his lifetime, he maintained students around him, and some of these later founded their own *madāris*. For instance, Muḥammad Mūd established his madrasa in Gwandu and al-Ḥājj Sa’d in Kano.⁶⁵

Ibn Fodio considered taking a child to a place of learning a fundamental right of the child.⁶⁶ Therefore, articulating the concept of child’s right to education within the Islamic framework. He approached the curriculum from both its structural and hidden dimensions. For this reason, when speaking about the choice of teacher, he suggests a preference for such an exemplary teacher who would impart moral refinement alongside the formal curriculum.⁶⁷

As for the formal curriculum, Ibn Fodio envisaged a sequential structure: first the Qur’an, then the Sunnah. He believes this will cultivate the love for the Qur’an in the child’s heart. After these two core subjects, he recommended Arabic (the language of scholarship and governance), followed by other sciences.⁶⁸ He cautioned against beginning with disciplines such as mathematics or logic, and he disapproved of inculcating language skills through fictional narratives.⁶⁹

⁶¹ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 13.

⁶² Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 14.

⁶³ Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria*, 59.

⁶⁴ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, ‘Kaff al-ikhwān ‘an al-ta’arruḍ bi-l-inkār ‘alā ahl al-īmān’, *Mukhtārāt Min Mu’allaḥāt Shaykh ‘Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra’ Publishing House, 2013), 3/255.

⁶⁵ Sani Musa Ayagi, ‘al-Muqaddima’, *Kifāyat du’afā’ al-sūdān fī bayān tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 2 Volume (Kano: Dar’Ummah for Publishing Agency, 2010), 32-33.

⁶⁶ Ibn Fodio, ‘Maṣāliḥ al-insān’, 2/133.

⁶⁷ Ibn Fodio, ‘Maṣāliḥ al-insān’, 2/133.

⁶⁸ Ibn Fodio, ‘Maṣāliḥ al-insān’, 2/134.

⁶⁹ Ibn Fodio, ‘Maṣāliḥ al-insān’, 2/134.

Regarding the school timetable, Ibn Fodio's perspective can be seen through his versification of the Moroccan Mālikī scholar al-Shawshawī's (d. 899/1494) work *al-Fawā'id al-jamīla*. Though the text primarily addresses Qur'anic study, its framework applies to the broader curriculum. Ibn Fodio outlines:

*Ayyāmuḥu al-sabt lil-arbi'ā'
Ba'da ṣalāt al-ṣubḥi li-ḍuḥā'*

*Thumma min al-ẓuhr li-ba'd al-'aṣr
Malāziman lahum biḥā bi-l-ṣabr*

*Wa dhālikum bi-l-layl ghayru lāzim
Illā li-'ādat wa-sharṭ qā'im*

*Lam ya'ud al-marḍā wa laysa yuḥḍar
Janāzatan fī waqtihim fayahḍhar*

*In sāra fī iṣlāḥihi li-ḍay'atihi
Yu'fā ilā thalāthah fī ghaybatihī⁷⁰*

Translation

Its (lesson's) days are from Saturday to Wednesday,
After the morning prayer until mid-morning.

Then from noon until after the afternoon prayer,
It is enforced on them, and they should be patient.

And at night, attendance is not required,
Except for a custom and an established condition.

He does not visit the sick, nor is he to attend
A funeral during their time—let him beware.

If he travels on his business affairs,
He is excused for up to three days in his absence.

From this, we understand that Ibn Fodio envisaged a five-day school week (Saturday to Wednesday), leaving Thursday and Friday as holidays. Study hours ran from shortly after *ṣubḥ* (dawn) until mid-morning (approximately 5:30–10:00 a.m.), followed by a break until *ẓuhr* (around 1:00 p.m.), with classes resuming until *'aṣr* (about 4:00 p.m.).⁷¹ This yields roughly 7.5 hours of study daily, and 3.5 hours allocated to a break. According to the poem, an optional evening session could be added depending on local customs and conditions.

It is noteworthy that regulations apply to both students and teachers. While the former are expected to wait patiently until the end of the lessons, the latter are prohibited from leaving lessons to visit the sick or attend funerals, and from neglecting teaching for business pursuits beyond three days. Acknowledging the practical challenges of sustaining a teacher's livelihood, Ibn Fodio, subscribing to the Mālikī position,

⁷⁰ Ibn Fodio, *al-Fawā'id al-jalīla*, 103-104.

⁷¹ Estimated times are based on the average *ṣalāt* times in Gwandu, Abdullah b. Fodio's residence, with approximately fifteen minutes allocated for each prayer.

permitted Qur'an teachers to receive remuneration.⁷² Elsewhere, he stipulates that such payment should be generous rather than token.⁷³

4. Approaches in Child Education

Whether in formal or informal contexts, Ibn Fodio's thought on education can be read from multiple perspectives. Some of these are related to contemporary educational discourse. Others are concerned with the socio-cultural and temporal realities of his environment, and others are rooted in the tradition of classical Islamic pedagogy. In this section of the study, we have identified and examined the specific instructions articulated by Ibn Fodio in his works, with particular attention to their pedagogical significance and underlying educational philosophy.

4.1. Discipline and Fortitude in Childhood

The use of corporal punishment, particularly flogging, to encourage obedience, remains a recurring topic in modern Islamic education discourse. However, in premodern contexts, the question was rarely framed as "to flog or not to flog," since textual evidence within the Islamic tradition affirms its permissibility for disciplinary purposes.⁷⁴ Rather, the debate historically centred on when and how such punishment should be administered.

In his *al-Fawā'id*, Abdullah b. Fodio, versifying the work of al-Shawshawī, addressed this issue. He notes that beating a child for educational purposes is permissible (*mubāḥ*), provided it remains moderate.⁷⁵ Human dispositions, he observes, differ: some pupils respond to instruction without physical discipline, while others require it. Thus, the children should be treated accordingly. He went further to note that permissible forms include striking the back with the shirt on or the feet, and a wet cane (*ṣawṭun raṭṭun*) should be used.⁷⁶ The choice of a wet cane is likely to reduce physical harm, since it is more flexible and less likely to splinter, lest it cause cuts or severe bruising.

In *al-Fawā'id*, the grounds for such discipline include neglecting prayer, lying, cursing, truancy, disobedience to parents, associating with corrupt company, or engaging in evil plots (*makā'id*). According to Ibn Fodio, within the Mālikī school, jurists differed over the age at which corporal punishment becomes permissible: Ibn Qāsim set it at ten, while Ashhab allowed it from seven. Regarding the number of strokes, he notes that the popular opinion does not impose a fixed limit, leaving it to the teacher's discretion. However, various scholars have suggested ranges from two to ten, depending on the offence, with excess potentially warranting *qisāṣ* (legal retaliation).⁷⁷

Ibn Fodio appears to have conceptualised the cultivation of resilience and bravery as an outcome of his system of training. In *Tahdhīb al-insān*, he advises that a child should be restrained from crying out when subjected to corporal punishment in the context of formal learning, and from seeking external assistance during such moments. The child, he notes, should instead be encouraged to cultivate patience, with the instruction: "This patience is the hallmark of courage, bravery, and the freeborn, whereas crying out is the mark of the enslaved."⁷⁸

⁷² Ibn Fodio, *al-Fawā'id al-jalīla*, 99.

⁷³ Ibn Fodio, 'Maṣāliḥ al-insān', 2/134.

⁷⁴ For more details, see. Atanas Shinikov, 'To Flog or Not to Flog? On Instructive Uses of Violence in Muslim Pedagogy and Education', *Schüler und Meister*, ed. Andreas Speer - Thomas Jeschke (De Gruyter, 2016), 569–590.

⁷⁵ Ibn Fodio, *al-Fawā'id al-jalīla*, 116.

⁷⁶ Ibn Fodio, *al-Fawā'id al-jalīla*, 117.

⁷⁷ Ibn Fodio, *al-Fawā'id al-jalīla*, 117.

⁷⁸ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 13.

4.2. Reinforcement and Habit Formation

One of the most influential theories of learning in modern educational studies is Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura in 1971. This theory expands on traditional behaviourist approaches by positing that learning occurs through the acquisition of behaviours, attitudes, and emotional reactions from the social environment. While reinforcement plays a role, Bandura emphasises that the cognitive processes governing one's response to stimuli are far more critical in shaping behaviour.⁷⁹

Ibn Fodio's pedagogical thought can be read through the lens of Social Learning Theory. As previously discussed, he places strong emphasis on creating the right environment for a child's moral and religious growth. This includes assigning the child to an exemplary teacher, whose character serves as a living model, hence his figurative use of the term *foster* to describe the teacher's role.⁸⁰ His insistence on prohibiting children from keeping bad company likewise reflects a keen awareness of the social transmission of behaviour.

In terms of reinforcement of moral character, transmitting al-Ghazālī's ideas, Abdullah b. Fodio advises that whenever a child displays refined manners or performs praiseworthy deeds, they should be honoured and rewarded with something that brings them happiness. While his understanding of reinforcing good actions is broad, he offers a different approach to handling misconduct. According to him, when a child commits a wrongful act but keeps it hidden, the parent should ignore it rather than reprimand immediately.⁸¹ This can be understood as indicating that the child is experiencing an internal moral struggle as he is aware of the wrongdoing and is attempting to conceal it. While cognitive dissonance may allow him to abandon the act, immediate confrontation might instead normalise the act.

However, Ibn Fodio warns against allowing faults to be public; once they are, the child may lose all inhibition. If a child becomes openly associated with a fault and continues it without shame, they may persist in it without fear. He further states that when a child commits a wrongful act openly and begins influencing others, a punishment should be used, but not openly. This will be a deliberate effort to impress upon the child the gravity of their misdeed. The parent, he notes, should issue a warning such as: "Beware lest you are seen in such a state, and you become disgraced among people."⁸²

Viewed through Social Learning Theory, Ibn Fodio's approach shows an implicit recognition of symbolic conditioning—the process by which emotion-laden words and associations shape behaviour. Words that evoke feelings of revulsion or fear can instil aversion to harmful actions, while words carrying positive connotations can reinforce desirable behaviours.⁸³ In this case, Ibn Fodio leverages the child's natural desire to avoid public shame as a deterrent.

At the same time, Ibn Fodio warns against what behaviourist theorists would later term habituation—the diminishing of an emotional response to a stimulus through overexposure.⁸⁴ Overusing denouncing words, he explains, will make the child indifferent to blame and diminish their sense of the moral weight of repulsive acts. Instead, he suggests varying the stimulus. For example, the mother should caution the child that their father will disapprove.⁸⁵ Thus, it preserves the emotional force of the warning and reinforces moral restraint.

⁷⁹ Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (New York: General Learning Press, 1971), 2-19.

⁸⁰ Ibn Fodio, 'Maṣāliḥ al-insān', 2/134.

⁸¹ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 12; Cf. al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 3/73.

⁸² Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 12.

⁸³ Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*, 13.

⁸⁴ American Psychological Association, *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (Accessed 16 August 2025), 'Habituation'.

⁸⁵ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 12.

4.3. Play and Physical Education

Although Ibn Fodio's primary focus was on moral and scriptural education, he did not neglect the psychomotor development of the child. On the contrary, he regarded physical education and bodily development as integral components of holistic upbringing. In *Tahdhīb al-insān*, he advises that the periods outside of formal study should be utilised for recreation. He emphasises that, after leaving the school of learning, the child should be allowed to "play beautifully" to recover from the fatigue of study. Denying children such opportunities, he warns, leads to three detrimental outcomes: the death of the heart, the bluntness of the intellect, and a deficiency in livelihood (skills), eventually driving the child to reject learning altogether.⁸⁶

Nonetheless, Ibn Fodio maintains moderation in recreation by setting limits on both time and place. In *Tahdhīb al-insān*, he cautions that children should not be allowed to play to the point of exhaustion.⁸⁷ Similarly, in *Ḍiyā' ahl al-iḥtisāb*, he states that children should not be prohibited from entering the mosque, provided they are not playing within its confines.⁸⁸ This underscores the need to teach children to respect sacred spaces even when they play.

Beyond recreation, Abdullah b. Fodio also recognises the value of deliberate physical training. He advises parents to accustom their children to walking during daylight hours, to encourage regular movement (*al-ḥaraka*), and to engage in physical exercises (*al-riyāḍāt*) to prevent the onset of lethargy.⁸⁹

4.4. Gender Biasness

In light of the common but unfounded prejudice that Islamic scholarship historically imposed strict gender restrictions, the intellectual and social milieu of Abdullah b. Fodio, shaped by the broader Fodio movement, has been lauded by many researchers for its commitment to female education.⁹⁰ His brother, Uthman b. Fodio openly criticised those who prevented the women of their households from pursuing learning.⁹¹ This inclusive ethos is exemplified in the celebrated scholarship of Uthman's daughter, Nana Asma'u, who was a poet and a polyglot writer.⁹² Her sister Khadija bint Uthman and Abdullah's own daughter, Aisha, were both recognised as learned teachers.⁹³

This commitment to female education was not without its critics. On one occasion, Uthman instructed Abdullah to respond to the scholar Mustafa Goni, who condemned their inclusion of women in learning circles on the grounds of gender mixing.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 12.

⁸⁷ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 13.

⁸⁸ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, 'Ḍiyā' ahl al-iḥtisāb 'alā ṭarīq al-sunna wa al-ṣawāb', *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Shaykh 'Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra' Publishing House, 2013), 3/99.

⁸⁹ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 13.

⁹⁰ Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria*, 56; Usman M. Bugaje, *The Past as Future: Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Sokoto Caliphate* (Books and Libraries, 2015), 52-54; Jean Boyd - Beverly Mack, *Educating Muslim Women: The West African Legacy of Nana Asmau 1793-1864* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing Ltd, 2013), 164-165; Oyelami, Ifeoluwa Siddiq. *Abdullah b. Fūdī ve Ziyā'ü't-Te'vîl Fî Meâni't-Tenzîl Adlı Tefsiri*. Kayseri: Erciyes Üniversitesi, Masters Thesis, 2020, 15-17. Boyd and Mack cite the British explorer Commander Hugh Clapperton, who observed of the women in Sokoto that "they are allowed more liberty than the generality of Muslim women." They suggest, however, that this remark may well reflect Clapperton's perceptions shaped by prevailing stereotypes. See. *Educating Muslim Women*, 69.

⁹¹ Uthman b. Fodio, 'Nūr al-albāb', *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Shaykh 'Uthmān b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra' Publishing House, 2013), 7.

⁹² For details about her life and legacy, see. Boyd - Mack, *Educating Muslim Women*, 33-149.

⁹³ Boyd - Mack, *Educating Muslim Women*, 179; For more information about Khadija bint Uthman b. Fodio, see. Muhammad Shareef bin Farid, *Khadijatu al Kubra Bint Shehu Uthman Ibn Fuduye* (Sankore Institute of Islamic-African Studies International, 2025).

⁹⁴ See Ibn Fodio, *Tazyīn al-warakāt*, 43-44.

Abdullah's works reflect no restriction on educational purpose or access based on gender, though they do exhibit elements of gender sensitivity in moral upbringing. For example, he was explicit that boys should not wear colourful or flamboyant clothing, as these are attire reserved for women.⁹⁵ Thus, while both boys and girls were equally encouraged to acquire knowledge, Ibn Fodio's approach recognised and preserved certain gender distinctions in the style of upbringing.

Discussion

This study has sought to synthesise the views of Abdullah b. Fodio on children and child education through his opinions, warnings, and interpretations scattered across his works. The analysis has been thematically presented. Even when it examined several dimensions of his thought, it does not claim to have exhaustively mapped out all his statements regarding children. For instance, although the child's individual rights as a member of the family have been discussed, little attention has been paid to civic and legal rights. Ibn Fodio, for example, mentions that a ruler should be accessible to the "women" and "children" under his authority.⁹⁶ Similarly, questions surrounding penalties for crimes involving children, the status of children as victims in legal disputes, or whether they could be summoned for *jihād* and what becomes of them on the battlefield, are all crucial issues. These matters, however, extend beyond the scope of this paper, and would move the discussion from education and child psychology to law, governance, and public administration.

At the foundational level, Ibn Fodio echoes the classical Muslim conception of the child as being born pure (*fiṭra*) and requiring preservation through training. He apportions this responsibility primarily to parents, though in practice, his writings often give greater weight to the father's role. The father is responsible for selecting a virtuous spouse, engaging a good midwife, and later taking the child to a competent teacher. This emphasis reflects the patriarchal family structure of Muslim societies, where men bore primary responsibility for protection and guardianship. Nonetheless, Ibn Fodio does not exclude mothers, who he assigns an active role in correcting and guiding the child when necessary.

Ibn Fodio also frames child-rearing as both a spiritual trust and a moral trial. Parents are entrusted with the child, and their success or failure in fulfilling their moral training carries eternal consequences—spiritual elevation if successful, and punishment if negligent. His rhetorical linkage of child-rearing to the child's *ṣilat al-rahim* (bond of kinship) is particularly striking: neglecting a child's upbringing, he warns, is akin to severing kinship ties, and thus incurs the same moral liability.

While Ibn Fodio's representation of education is heavily weighted towards moral and religious instruction, it may not capture the broader features of traditional African education. His works do not explicitly foreground the cultivation of indigenous language, culture, or vocational skills, which in African contexts were primarily transmitted through generational, communal, and experiential learning. Nevertheless, in the domain of Islamic knowledge, his writings articulate structured and theoretical plans for the child's intellectual and spiritual formation.

Discipline forms a central theme in his pedagogy. He warns against excessive indulgence in play, sleep, ostentation, and flamboyant lifestyles, while still affirming the need for measured recreation and rest. In this sense, he sought to cultivate resilience and moderation, preparing children for the hardships of his time. His *Tahdhīb al-insān* and *Masāliḥ al-insān* illustrate the progression of his thought: beginning with the

⁹⁵ Ibn Fodio, *Tahdhīb al-insān*, 12.

⁹⁶ Abdullah Ibn Fodio, 'Ḍiyā' al-ḥukkām fīmā lahum wa-'alayhim min al-aḥkām', *Mukhtārāt min mu'allafāt Shaykh 'Abdullāh b. Fūdī*, 3 Volume (Gusau: Iqra' Publishing House, 2013), 3/124.

duties owed to the child even before birth, moving to the self-cultivation of the parents, and finally to the systematic training of the child through distinct developmental stages.

Another noteworthy dimension of Abdullah b. Fodio's educational thought is his emphasis on reinforcement in moral and behavioural training. A concept which is influenced by al-Ghazālī's advises on child education as discussed in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. To summarise this perspective, behaviour is shaped by observation, imitation, and reinforcement—whether positive or negative. Ibn Fodio emphasises that children should be encouraged as soon as they act positively. However, when they act otherwise, there should be carefulness on when and how to reprimand and redirect them. Here, he articulated an opinion that places compassion and the child's own recognition of their wrongdoing. In a nutshell, his ideas can be likened to modern social learning theory.

A modern reader might raise the question of whether Ibn Fodio, with his prolific writings, ever considered producing works specifically for children. However, this thing would be an anachronistic one since the genre of "children's literature" was absent in his milieu. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that his poetry in Arabic, Hausa, and Fulfulde carries pedagogical concern for all-age accessibility. Therefore, they can be considered functional equivalents of didactic texts for children.

Conclusion

This study has outlined key aspects of Abdullah b. Fodio's views on childhood and child education. It shows that his thought integrates classical Islamic pedagogical principles with the lived realities of his society, producing a model that emphasises moral discipline, spiritual accountability, and structured stages of learning. His writings demonstrate sensitivity to parental responsibility, the role of exemplary teachers, and the balance between discipline and recreation in shaping resilient children.

Ibn Fodio's writings can also be viewed as a direct challenge to the colonial prejudice that Africans lacked the intellectual sophistication to address critical issues such as education in written form. His works demonstrate unequivocally that this was not the case. Although actual lapses may have existed within premodern African societies, as this study indicates, Ibn Fodio's critique shows that exposure to education, particularly traditional Islamic education, had the potential to free individuals from certain superstitious beliefs, including misconceptions about the nature of children and practices surrounding natal care, for which he advocated expert medical treatment.

In line with Islamic moral principles, Abdullah b. Fodio emphasised that the rights and care of children begin as early as the selection of a spouse and the observance of an Islamically compliant courtship. Re-read in a contemporary context, this perspective places a moral and social responsibility upon prospective couples to plan for parenthood thoughtfully, thereby safeguarding the foundations of family life that continues to be eroded in modern Muslim society.

Ibn Fodio's pedagogical insights also offer a lens for evaluating contemporary debates in Nigerian Islamic education. The *Almajiri* system, for example, has struggled to meet the demands of modern society, leaving many students reliant on begging for survival. Historical models of education, moral formation, and child development, as outlined by Ibn Fodio, may therefore provide valuable guidance for contemporary reforms.

More broadly, this study shows the importance of reassessing precolonial African intellectualism, recognising Islam not only as a spiritual framework but also as an epistemic system that shaped educational thought. Likewise, Abdullah b. Fodio's dual role as a scholar and statesman shows the interconnection of education and political guidance. This study suggests that the scholarly community engage more deeply with the pedagogical contributions of Islamic reformist movements, such as the Fodio movement. This

engagement is particularly pertinent to discussions of formal education, including the education of the girl-child, as hinted in this research.

Conclusively, the study acknowledges limitations in Fodio's writings, particularly regarding children's civic rights, legal protections, and status in times of conflict. These areas merit further research, both within his corpus and across the broader intellectual landscape of precolonial African Muslim scholars. Thus, while this study does not claim to have exhausted the subject, it highlights the enduring significance of Abdullah b. Fodio's contributions. His works occupy a unique position at the intersection of African and Islamic intellectual traditions, and a deeper engagement with his ideas promises to enrich our understanding of both the history of Islamic education and the development of African childhood.

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