

The Kubrawiyya School As A Historical Model Of Mentoring, Reflective Practice, And Holistic Education

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Abstract. The intellectual and spiritual legacy of Najm al-Din Kubra (1145-1221) is commonly examined within the history of Sufism, while its educational structure has received less systematic pedagogical interpretation. This study analyzes the Kubrawiyya school as a historical model of guided personal development and identifies conceptual parallels between its practices and selected principles of contemporary education. A qualitative, document-based historical-comparative design was employed. The source corpus included Kubra's principal doctrinal framework, classical accounts of the Kubrawi tradition, modern scholarship on the order, and educational literature on mentoring, scaffolding, reflection, mindfulness, staged competence, and whole-person learning. The materials were coded according to educational purpose, the role of the guide, the position of the learner, instructional processes, developmental stages, assessment, and social responsibility. The findings reveal five interconnected pedagogical features: individualized guidance through the murshid-murid relationship; conscious and disciplined practice associated with sobriety; progressive development from initiation to stability; self-observation and reflective regulation; and the integration of personal formation with ethical and civic responsibility. These features resemble, but should not be equated with, modern mentoring, scaffolding, reflective learning, and holistic education. The Kubrawiyya tradition therefore offers a historically grounded conceptual resource for culturally responsive pedagogy. Its contemporary use requires critical adaptation, voluntary participation, ethical safeguards, and a clear distinction between spiritual authority and professional educational roles.

Keywords: Najm al-Din Kubra; Kubrawiyya; Sufi education; mentoring; reflective practice; holistic education; self-regulation; Central Asian pedagogy

1. Introduction

Education is not limited to transmitting information; it also forms habits, identity, ethical judgment, and social responsibility. Medieval Sufi communities were environments in which study, disciplined practice, companionship, and moral guidance operated together. One of the most influential Central Asian traditions was the Kubrawiyya, founded by Najm al-Din Kubra in Khwarazm. The order became prominent during the Mongol period and extended its influence across Persia and other regions (Algar, 2009a, 2009b).

Kubra was born in Khwarazm, probably in 1145, studied in several major centers, and later established a teaching community in Gurganj. His title wali-tarash, often translated as 'maker of saints,' reflects his reputation for educating accomplished disciples (Waley, 1991). His writings discuss spiritual discipline, self-knowledge, inner experience, and ethical development. Al-Usul al-'Ashara organizes training around repentance, restraint, trust, contentment, seclusion, remembrance, orientation, patience, self-observation, and acceptance. Fawa'id al-Jamal wa-Fawatih al-Jalal examines the interpretation and regulation of inner experience (Meier, 1957).

Four educational features are especially visible: the murshid-murid relationship, the principle of sober awareness, progressive levels of development, and muraqaba or attentive self-observation. These invite comparison with mentoring, scaffolding, reflective practice, self-regulation, and whole-person education. The comparison must remain cautious. Medieval Sufi training and modern education differ in purpose, authority, evidence, and institutional context. Similarity does not establish direct historical derivation.

This study reconstructs the pedagogical architecture of the Kubrawiyya school and assesses its contemporary relevance. It asks: What educational roles and processes can be identified in the tradition? Which elements have meaningful parallels in modern pedagogy? What ethical limits should govern adaptation? The article thereby contributes to the study of Central Asian educational heritage and culturally responsive pedagogy.

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative historical-comparative design based on document analysis was used. The corpus included scholarship on Kubra's al-Usul al-'Ashara and Fawa'ih al-Jamal; biographical and historical studies of Kubra, his disciples, and the Kubrawiyya; general studies of Sufism; and educational literature on mentoring, scaffolding, reflection, mindfulness, and holistic learning (Schimmel, 1975; Waley, 1991; Wood et al., 1976; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Phan et al., 2022).

Analysis proceeded through three stages. First, sources were read for statements about educational aims, the guide's duties, learner conduct, practice, progression, assessment, and social ethics. Second, the material was coded into seven categories: educational purpose, educator role, learner agency, individualized guidance, reflective discipline, developmental assessment, and community responsibility. Third, the themes were compared with modern educational concepts. A parallel was accepted only when functional resemblance existed in more than one dimension.

Historical, doctrinal, and educational claims were triangulated across specialist sources. Modern terminology was used analytically rather than as an exact translation of Sufi concepts. The study is limited by the absence of direct observation and by the hagiographical character of some historical accounts. Its results are therefore a conceptual reconstruction intended to guide further research, not evidence that a Kubrawi-inspired intervention will automatically improve present-day outcomes.

3. Results

Five interconnected pedagogical features were identified: relational mentorship, conscious discipline, staged development, reflective self-regulation, and socially responsible holistic formation.

3.1. Relational mentorship

The murshid-murid relationship was the primary educational structure. The guide was expected to understand the learner's disposition, habits, endurance, emotional state, and readiness for particular practices. Guidance was therefore adaptive rather than uniform. The physician analogy associated with Kubra is pedagogically important: instruction, like treatment, should correspond to the condition of the recipient. The aim was gradual correction of habits and development of discernment.

This resembles contemporary mentoring, which combines guidance, support, modeling, feedback, and identity development (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). It also resembles scaffolding when the guide adjusts support to readiness and reduces assistance as competence grows (Wood et al., 1976). However, modern mentorship requires consent, defined roles, professional boundaries, accountability, and the learner's right to question or withdraw.

3.2. Sobriety and conscious learning

The Kubrawi orientation followed the sober tendency associated with Junayd of Baghdad. Sobriety meant preserving awareness, responsibility, and discernment during inner change. Experience was not validated by intensity alone; it had to be interpreted, disciplined, and expressed through ethical conduct. Educationally, this prioritizes deliberate practice and the regulation of emotion by thoughtful judgment.

The closest modern parallel is reflective learning. Reflection requires learners to examine experience, identify assumptions, evaluate action, and plan improved responses. Research connects structured reflection with professional identity and the transformation of experience into learning (Harvey et al., 2016; Colomer et al., 2020). The analogy with mindfulness is narrower: both value attention, but Kubrawi awareness is explicitly theological. Its transferable insight is purposeful attention, not the reduction of a religious practice to a concentration technique.

3.3. Progressive development

Kubrawi sources describe stages that may be summarized as beginning, variation, and stability: muḥtadī, ṣāhib al-talwīn, and ṣāhib al-tamkīn. These are spiritual categories, not academic grades, but they express a developmental principle. Novices need structure and close direction; developing learners experience variability and require feedback; mature learners demonstrate steadier judgment and greater independence.

The ten principles can also be interpreted as dimensions of formation. Repentance creates readiness for change; restraint controls distraction; trust and contentment regulate emotional orientation; seclusion protects concentration; remembrance sustains purpose; patience supports persistence; self-observation provides

feedback; and acceptance indicates mature alignment. The framework therefore integrates motivation, attention, emotion, persistence, metacognition, and ethical commitment without losing its original religious meaning.

3.4. Muraqaba and self-regulation

Muraqaba required attentive observation of intention, distraction, emotion, and conduct. It created an internal feedback process through which external guidance could gradually be internalized. This resembles metacognitive regulation: planning, monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting one's approach. A contemporary application could include reflective journals, guided dialogue, self-assessment, and structured debriefing. Such tools should evaluate learning without forcing disclosure of private beliefs or personal experiences.

3.5. Holistic formation and responsibility

The Kubrawiyya linked personal development with communal duty. Its disciples became teachers, writers, and transmitters in different regions. The tradition's memory of Kubra remaining with the people of Khwarazm during the Mongol attack connected spiritual integrity with solidarity and responsibility. In educational terms, inward cultivation was incomplete without service.

This corresponds to whole-person education, which integrates cognition, emotion, values, identity, relationships, and action. It also supports citizenship education by connecting self-discipline with the common good. The diversity of Kubra's disciples suggests unity of ethical purpose without uniformity of talent or contribution.

4. Discussion

The results indicate that the Kubrawiyya school possessed a coherent pedagogy of formation. Relational guidance provided external support; sobriety protected learning from impulsiveness; progressive stages organized development; self-observation converted guidance into internal regulation; and social responsibility directed growth beyond the self.

The strongest modern parallel is mentoring. Both approaches treat learning as relational, developmental, and responsive to individual need. The Kubrawi case adds historical depth by embedding mentorship in daily practice, community, and moral purpose. The comparison with scaffolding is also useful because assistance changes as the learner becomes more independent. Yet Kubrawi training concerned transformation of the person rather than completion of a bounded cognitive task.

A second contribution is the integration of reflection with conduct. In many curricula, reflection is added after the main activity. Kubrawi self-observation was part of practice itself. This suggests that reflection should be continuous, guided by criteria, and followed by changed action. A third contribution is resistance to fragmented educational objectives. Knowledge, well-being, ethics, identity, and service were treated as related dimensions of development.

A culturally responsive modern model could use three levels. Beginning learners would receive orientation, routines, modeling, and frequent feedback. Developing learners would undertake more complex tasks, keep reflective records, and discuss difficulties with trained mentors. Advanced learners would demonstrate independent judgment, assist junior students, and connect expertise with community service. Assessment could combine knowledge, performance, reflection, and ethical reasoning.

Adaptation requires safeguards. Religious concepts must be represented accurately and identified when used metaphorically. Participation in contemplative activities must be voluntary and inclusive. Mentors need training, supervision, and codes of conduct. Educators must not claim authority over a learner's conscience. Any intervention should be empirically evaluated for learning, accessibility, psychological safety, and unintended effects.

The Kubrawiyya should not be called the literal origin of student-centered learning, evidence-based education, or scaffolding. These are modern research concepts. The defensible conclusion is that the tradition developed distinctive practices that are functionally comparable in selected respects. Future textual, comparative, and mixed-method research can test whether individualized guidance, structured reflection, progressive responsibility, and service improve contemporary mentoring.

5. Conclusion

The Kubrawiyya school offers a recognizable pedagogical architecture based on individualized mentorship, conscious discipline, progressive development, self-observation, and communal responsibility. These features establish meaningful, though non-identical, parallels with mentoring, scaffolding, metacognition, reflective learning, mindfulness, and whole-person education.

Its value is not in romanticizing the past, but in widening the historical imagination of education. Critically and ethically adapted, the Kubrawi heritage can enrich culturally responsive mentoring and reflective education in Central Asia and beyond.

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