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Learning Potential in Humans from a Qur'anic Perspective Surah An-Nahl Verse 78

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ABSTRACT

Human beings are created with capacities that enable them to acquire knowledge and fulfill their responsibility as stewards of the earth. QS An-Nahl 16:78 describes these capacities as hearing (al-sam'), sight (al-abṣār), and al-af'idah, commonly interpreted as the heart or inner faculty of understanding. This study examines how these three faculties relate to human learning and how their Qur'anic significance can inform contemporary educational thought. It employs a qualitative library research design, combining thematic analysis of the verse and selected Qur'anic interpretations with a narrative synthesis of recent empirical research on multimedia learning, retrieval practice, and metacognition. The analysis identifies a conceptual sequence in which hearing and sight provide access to information and experience, while al-af'idah supports interpretation, reflection, and discernment. The verse's reference to gratitude frames learning as a process with ethical and spiritual purposes, rather than the accumulation of knowledge alone. The empirical literature reviewed offers complementary evidence: a meta-analysis of multimedia learning covered 1,189 studies and 78,177 participants; a systematic review of classroom retrieval practice included 50 experiments involving 5,374 learners, most of which reported learning benefits; and a longitudinal meta-analysis of 71,171 students found a positive association between metacognition and subsequent academic achievement (r = .22). These findings are not original data from the present study and do not directly test the Qur'anic interpretation. The study concludes that QS An-Nahl 16:78 supports a holistic conception of learning that integrates sensory engagement, reflective understanding, and responsible action. Education can develop these human capacities when knowledge is pursued with gratitude and applied for individual and social benefit.

Keywords : QS An-Nahl 16:78; Human Potential; Islamic Education; Learning; Metacognition

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an presents human beings as learners whose knowledge develops through capacities bestowed by God. QS An-Nahl 16:78 describes people as being brought forth from their mothers' wombs knowing nothing, and then endowed with hearing (al-sam'), sight (al-abṣār), and hearts or inner faculties (al-af'idah), so that they may be grateful. The verse therefore links human development to the gradual acquisition and processing of knowledge. It also invites an educational reading: learning involves receiving information, observing and interpreting experience, and forming understanding and judgment.

This perspective is relevant to contemporary education, where learning is often discussed in terms of cognitive performance or the use of particular media. Research on multimedia and multisensory learning shows that combining verbal and visual information can support learning, but the benefits depend on how the material is designed and whether the sensory information is relevant and coordinated (Mayer, 2017; Noetel et al., 2022; Shams & Seitz, 2008; Wallace et al., 2020). Evidence also indicates that sensory input alone does

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not guarantee understanding. Learners must attend to information, connect it with prior knowledge, monitor their comprehension, and reflect on what they have learned (Agarwal et al., 2021; Guo, 2022; He et al., 2024).

The educational problem, then, is how to understand and develop human learning potential without reducing it either to sensory reception or to purely mental processing. In Islamic education, this question also concerns the relationship between knowledge, gratitude, ethical conduct, and responsibility. QS An-Nahl 16:78 offers a significant point of departure, yet its three faculties require careful interpretation before they can inform educational thought and practice.

Recent studies of QS An-Nahl 16:78 have examined its implications for human nature, Islamic pedagogy, and the development of potential. Research on the verse commonly identifies hearing, sight, and al-af'idah as interrelated means through which people acquire and make sense of knowledge (Muthofa & Putri, 2022; Napitupulu, 2019; Sawaluddin et al., 2020). Other studies connect the verse to pedagogical potential and the formation of a well-rounded person, emphasizing intellectual, physical, spiritual, and moral development (Latipah et al., 2021; Muthofa & Putri, 2022). Recent work further interprets al-af'idah as a capacity for receiving, evaluating, and internalizing information, bringing the verse into dialogue with reflective learning (Septian et al., 2026).

Empirical research in education provides a complementary perspective. Meta-analyses report positive effects for well-designed multimedia instruction and formative assessment, while also showing that instructional choices and feedback shape learning outcomes (Karaman, 2021; Noetel et al., 2022; Wisniewski et al., 2020). Studies of self-regulated learning and metacognition likewise associate planning, monitoring, and evaluation with academic achievement (Guo, 2022; Li et al., 2018; The Relation between Self-Regulated Learning and Academic Achievement, 2016). Active learning and retrieval practice have also demonstrated benefits across classroom and higher-education settings (Agarwal et al., 2021; Freeman et al., 2014; Strelan et al., 2020). Taken together, these bodies of work suggest that learning is a coordinated process involving perception, interpretation, practice, reflection, and application. The Qur'anic account, however, adds a normative dimension: knowledge is received as a trust and should lead to gratitude and responsible action.

Despite growing interest in QS An-Nahl 16:78, much of the relevant scholarship treats the verse through a single lens for example, as a general account of human potential, a basis for sensory learning, or a point of comparison with educational theories. Meanwhile, empirical learning research typically examines cognition, instructional design, or achievement without engaging the verse's theological and ethical dimensions. These strands remain insufficiently integrated. A further conceptual issue concerns the interpretation of al-af'idah. Translating it simply as "heart" may obscure its relationship to understanding, discernment, and reflective judgment; translating it only as "mind" may omit its affective and spiritual significance. The research gap is therefore not merely a shortage of studies citing the verse. It is the need for a coherent conceptual account of how hearing, sight, and al-af'idah function together in learning, and how this account can be related to contemporary evidence without treating Qur'anic language as a direct equivalent of modern psychological constructs.

This study aims to examine human learning potential from the perspective of QS An-Nahl 16:78 by analyzing the educational significance of hearing, sight, and al-af'idah. It asks how these faculties can be understood as connected dimensions of learning and how their integration may inform Islamic educational thought. The study's novelty lies in bringing Qur'anic interpretation into a structured dialogue with recent research on multimedia learning, multisensory processing, metacognition, self-regulated learning, and reflective practice. Rather than equating the verse's terms with scientific categories, it treats empirical findings as a complementary lens and preserves the verse's theological context. The resulting framework presents learning as a process of receiving information, observing and interpreting it, reflecting on its meaning, and translating understanding into responsible conduct. In this way, QS An-Nahl 16:78 can contribute to a more holistic discussion of learning—one that connects sensory engagement and intellectual development with gratitude, character, and human responsibility. The study provides a conceptual foundation for further empirical research on how Islamic educational practice can cultivate these interconnected potentials.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative library research design to examine human learning potential from the perspective of Qur'an 16:78. A library-based approach was appropriate because the research focused on interpreting a Qur'anic verse and synthesizing conceptual and empirical literature, rather than collecting new

data from participants. The study therefore does not claim to measure learning outcomes or test an instructional intervention. Its purpose was to develop a reasoned conceptual account of how hearing (al-sam‘), sight (al-abṣār), and al-af’idah relate to the acquisition, processing, and application of knowledge.

The primary source was QS An-Nahl 16:78 in the Arabic text and a recognized English translation. The verse was examined in its immediate textual context and in relation to selected Qur’anic exegeses and scholarly discussions of its educational meaning. Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles and research reviews published from 2017 to 2026. These sources addressed Qur’anic epistemology and Islamic education, human learning potential, multisensory and multimedia learning, metacognition, self-regulated learning, formative assessment, and feedback. This time range was used to foreground recent scholarship while allowing the inclusion of foundational studies published within the period.

Literature was identified through searches of scholarly journal platforms and indexing or discovery services, including Google Scholar, Crossref, DOAJ, and Indonesian journal portals. Search terms included combinations of “An-Nahl 16:78,” “hearing sight heart Qur’an,” “Islamic education and human potential,” “multisensory learning,” “multimedia learning,” “metacognition,” and “self-regulated learning.” Sources were included when they were relevant to the research questions, identifiable as scholarly publications, and provided conceptual discussion or empirical findings that could inform the interpretation of learning. Sources were excluded when their connection to the verse or learning was only incidental, their publication details could not be verified, or they repeated material without adding relevant analysis.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the verse and selected interpretations were read closely to identify key concepts, particularly the sequence of human birth without knowledge, the endowment of learning faculties, and the stated purpose of gratitude. Second, relevant passages from the literature were coded thematically under three analytical categories: sensory reception, cognitive and reflective processing, and ethical or practical application. Third, findings from Qur’anic and educational scholarship were compared to identify areas of convergence and conceptual distinctions. For example, research on multimedia learning supports the educational relevance of coordinated verbal and visual information, while cautioning that presentation design and cognitive demands affect learning (Mayer, 2017; Noetel et al., 2022). Research on multisensory processing likewise indicates that combining sensory information may facilitate learning under appropriate conditions, while irrelevant or poorly coordinated input may interfere (Wallace et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2023). These findings were treated as complementary evidence, not as direct scientific equivalents of Qur’anic concepts.

Finally, the themes were synthesized into a conceptual account of learning potential that relates perception to interpretation, reflection, and responsible action. Studies of retrieval practice, metacognition, self-regulation, and feedback informed the discussion of how learners actively consolidate and evaluate knowledge (Agarwal et al., 2021; Guo, 2022; Li et al., 2018; Wisniewski et al., 2020). The synthesis was checked against the wording and context of the verse to avoid reducing al-af’idah to a single modern psychological construct. This interpretive procedure provides a transparent basis for the study’s conclusions while recognizing that a library-based conceptual analysis cannot establish causal effects in classroom settings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Qur’anic Text and Learning Potential

The primary textual source of this study is QS An-Nahl 16:78:

وَٱللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُم مِّنۢ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْـًٔا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَٱلْأَبْصَٰرَ وَٱلْأَفْـِٔدَةَ ۙ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

And Allah brought you out of your mothers’ wombs while you knew nothing, and He gave you hearing, sight, and hearts, so that you may be grateful.

The verse presents learning as a developmental process. Human beings begin life without acquired knowledge, but are endowed with faculties through which knowledge can be received, examined, and understood. The sequencehearing (*al-sam‘*), sight (*al-abṣār*), and hearts or inner faculties (*al-af’idah*) can be read educationally as moving from sensory access toward interpretation and judgment. The verse’s closing

phrase, *la'allakum tashkurūn* ("so that you may be grateful"), also gives learning a moral and spiritual orientation: knowledge is not merely accumulated but should guide responsible conduct.

Table 1. Conceptual functions of the faculties in QS An-Nahl 16:78

Qur'anic term	Educational interpretation	Role in learning
السَّمْعَ (*al-sam'*)	Hearing and attentive listening	Provides access to spoken instruction, explanation, dialogue, and recitation
الأَبْصَارَ (*al-abṣār*)	Sight and observation	Supports recognition, visual examination, comparison, and learning from visible examples
الأَفْئِدَةَ (*al-af'idah*)	Hearts or inner faculties, associated in the supplied interpretations with understanding and discernment	Enables learners to interpret, evaluate, distinguish, and give meaning to what they hear and observe
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ (*la'allakum tashkurūn*)	Gratitude and responsible use of human capacities	Connects knowledge with ethical, spiritual, and practical responsibility

Findings from the Exegetical Literature

The selected commentaries converge on the idea that human faculties are divine gifts intended to support knowledge and purposeful action. Their emphases differ, however. Al-Maraghi stresses the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and to use one's faculties in obedience to God. Ibn Kathir highlights the progression from birth without knowledge to the development of hearing, sight, and the capacity to distinguish what is beneficial or harmful. Al-Munir similarly treats these faculties as means for learning, understanding guidance, and expressing gratitude. The material attributed to *Tafsir Al-Misbah* describes the limits of human knowledge and the significance of birth as a sign of divine power. The supplied passage also quotes Sayyid Qutb; because *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān* is Qutb's work, the final manuscript should distinguish Qutb's interpretation from Quraish Shihab's discussion in *Al-Misbah*. In *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān*, the emphasis is on human knowledge as a gift from God and on gratitude as a response to that gift. Across these interpretations, the faculties are not presented as isolated instruments: hearing and sight provide access to experience, while the heart or inner faculty supports understanding and discernment.

Empirical Evidence from Learning Research

The conceptual reading above can be compared with empirical research on learning, while recognizing that contemporary psychological constructs are not equivalent to Qur'anic terms. A meta-meta-analysis of multimedia learning reviewed 29 meta-analyses, covering 1,189 studies and 78,177 participants. It found that several design principles, including signaling, segmentation, and the coordination of words and visuals, were associated with improved learning outcomes (Noetel et al., 2022). This supports the educational relevance of combining auditory and visual information when instruction is designed purposefully; it does not establish that simply adding more sensory input will improve learning.

A systematic review of retrieval practice in school and classroom settings coded 50 experiments involving 5,374 learners. Most reported a positive benefit, indicating that learning involves more than initial exposure: learners also benefit from actively recalling and consolidating information (Agarwal et al., 2021). Research on feedback likewise synthesized 435 studies and reported that feedback can influence learning, although its value depends on the information it provides and how it is used (Wisniewski et al., 2020).

Table 2. Empirical evidence relevant to the Qur'anic learning framework

Study	Evidence base	Reported finding	Relevance to this study
Noetel et al. (2022)	29 reviews; 1,189 studies; 78,177 participants	Several multimedia design principles showed positive effects on learning	Provides evidence relevant to the coordinated use of verbal and visual materials
Agarwal et al. (2021)	50 classroom experiments; 5,374 participants	Retrieval practice benefited learning in most included experiments	Suggests that learning includes active recall and consolidation beyond receiving information
Wisniewski et al. (2020)	435 studies; more than 61,000 participants	Feedback affected learning outcomes, with effects dependent on feedback characteristics	Supports the importance of evaluating and refining understanding

Wallace et al. (2020)	Review of multisensory research	Multisensory processing is related to perception, cognition, and communication	Offers a scientific context for considering sensory information together, without equating it with Qur'anic terminology

Overall, the conceptual and empirical evidence supports a holistic account of learning: sensory access is important, but learning also requires interpretation, active engagement, evaluation, and application. In the framework of QS An-Nahl 16:78, these processes are situated within a broader theological and ethical purpose using the capacities granted to human beings with awareness and gratitude. These are findings from textual analysis and published research; no original participant-level or experimental data were provided for the present study.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that QS An-Nahl 16:78 frames learning as a gradual human process grounded in divinely bestowed capacities. The verse begins with the condition of having no acquired knowledge at birth and then identifies hearing (al-sam'), sight (al-abṣār), and al-af'idah as means through which people engage with knowledge. This sequence supports an educational interpretation in which learning involves more than receiving information: learners perceive, interpret, and use what they come to know. Recent Qur'anic studies similarly describe these faculties as interconnected elements of human potential and Islamic education (Tang, 2022; Askar et al., 2024; Solin & Sulisno, 2025; Romlah, 2026).

Hearing and sight can be understood as pathways for accessing instruction and experience. In educational settings, these may include listening to explanations, participating in dialogue, observing demonstrations, and interpreting visual materials. Contemporary research provides empirical support for carefully coordinated auditory and visual instruction. Noetel et al. (2022), in an overview of 29 reviews comprising 1,189 studies and 78,177 participants, found evidence for multiple multimedia design principles that can support learning. However, the benefit depends on instructional design. Li and Deng's (2023) meta-analysis of 29 studies and 198 comparisons found that congruent multisensory information can facilitate performance, whereas incongruent material can interfere with it. These findings are consistent with multimedia research emphasizing coherence, signaling, and appropriate coordination of words and visuals (Mayer, 2017; Castro-Alonso et al., 2021; Wong & Adesope, 2021; Cromley & Chen, 2025). Thus, the verse can inform an integrated view of learning, but it should not be used to claim that simply stimulating more senses necessarily improves achievement.

The interpretive significance of al-af'idah is central to this account. The supplied commentaries associate it with understanding and discernment, while recent Qur'anic scholarship discusses its role in processing, evaluating, and giving meaning to sensory information (Septian et al., 2026; Solin & Sulisno, 2025). This understanding must remain attentive to the Arabic term: al-af'idah should not be treated as an exact equivalent of any single psychological construct. Rather, it offers a theological and educational concept that can be placed in dialogue with research on cognition, metacognition, and reflection. Empirical evidence shows that metacognition is associated with later academic achievement: a longitudinal meta-analysis of 28 studies and 71,171 learners found a positive relationship between initial metacognition and subsequent achievement ($r = .22$) (He et al., 2024). Research on self-regulated learning also links planning, monitoring, and strategy use with learning outcomes (Li et al., 2018; Guo, 2022; Edisherashvili et al., 2022; Panadero, 2017).

These findings help explain why learning, in this Qur'anic framework, cannot be reduced to sensory exposure. Learners must attend to information, connect it with prior understanding, and judge its meaning. Classroom evidence supports this active dimension. Agarwal et al. (2021) reviewed 50 classroom experiments involving 5,374 learners and found that retrieval practice benefited learning in most included experiments. Meta-analytic work on active instruction has also reported higher assessment performance than traditional lecturing in humanities and social sciences (Kozanitis & Nenciovici, 2023). Feedback can further guide learners' evaluation and revision: a synthesis of 435 studies involving more than 61,000 participants reported an overall positive effect of feedback, while underscoring that its form matters (Wisniewski et al., 2020). Together with research on self-assessment and formative assessment, these findings suggest that the educational process should include opportunities to recall, discuss, reflect, and receive useful feedback (Yan et al., 2022; Karaman, 2021; Strelan et al., 2020; Ruitenburg et al., 2026).

The verse's closing phrase, la'allakum tashkurūn ("so that you may be grateful"), gives learning a purpose beyond knowledge acquisition. In the commentaries presented in the results, gratitude is associated with using one's faculties in ways that accord with divine guidance. Contemporary studies of Islamic education likewise connect the development of human potential with character, spiritual awareness, and social responsibility (Amarodin, 2021; Muthofa & Putri, 2022; Tang, 2022; Romlah, 2026). This ethical dimension complements empirical learning research, while remaining distinct from its measurable outcomes. Achievement scores may indicate learning performance, but they cannot by themselves establish gratitude, moral development, or spiritual understanding.

The study therefore contributes a conceptual synthesis rather than a new experimental result. Its interpretation connects the verse's sensory and reflective dimensions with current evidence on multimedia design, metacognition, retrieval practice, active learning, and feedback. The practical implication is to design learning experiences that engage listening and observation, encourage thoughtful interpretation, and provide opportunities to apply knowledge responsibly. These are educational implications drawn from Qur'anic interpretation and published research; they should be tested in future empirical studies across specific learner groups and instructional settings. This qualification preserves the distinction between theological interpretation and psychological measurement while showing how both can inform a broader discussion of human learning potential.

CONCLUSION

QS An-Nahl 16:78 presents human learning potential as a divine endowment. Human beings begin life without acquired knowledge, yet are equipped with hearing (al-sam'), sight (al-abṣār), and al-af'idah, understood in the interpretations examined as the inner capacity for understanding and discernment. These faculties work together: hearing and sight provide access to information and experience, while reflective judgment enables people to interpret what they encounter and distinguish beneficial from harmful, right from wrong, and guidance from error. The verse's closing reference to gratitude gives this learning process a moral and spiritual purpose.

The empirical literature reviewed supports aspects of this interpretation without directly testing the Qur'anic framework. A meta-analysis of multimedia learning covered 1,189 studies and 78,177 participants, finding that well-designed multimedia principles can support learning (Noetel et al., 2022). A review of classroom retrieval-practice research included 50 experiments and 5,374 learners, with most experiments reporting learning benefits (Agarwal et al., 2021). In addition, a longitudinal meta-analysis involving 71,171 students found a positive association between metacognition and later academic achievement (r = .22; He et al., 2024). These findings indicate that learning involves more than receiving sensory input; it also depends on active recall, reflection, and thoughtful use of knowledge. journals.sagepub.com

Accordingly, education can help develop human potential and support individual and social flourishing. Its contribution to dignity, confidence, and participation in society depends on access to meaningful learning and the responsible application of knowledge. This study is a conceptual synthesis, not an experiment; its conclusions should therefore be tested in future educational research. The Qur'anic perspective ultimately calls learners to cultivate their faculties and use knowledge with gratitude and responsibility.

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