

Factors Affecting Students' Interest in Learning Islamic

Education

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Abstract

The main objective of Islamic religious education in Malaysian secondary schools is to inculcate Islamic teachings and values in Muslim students. However, recent studies indicate that students had lesser interest to learn the subject. In response to this phenomenon, this study was carried out to identify the factors that affect students' interest in learning Islamic education in schools in Malaysia. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six Form Four students from a selected secondary school in the state of Selangor in central Malaysia. The findings indicate that there are two major factors affecting students' interest in learning Islamic education which are situational factors and individual factors. The situational factors are: (1) the parents' influence, (2) the Islamic education teacher's influence and, (3) the Islamic education curriculum, whereas the individual factors are: (1) initial interest that resides within each individual and, (2) learner diversity in learning. The findings also revealed that the Islamic education teacher is the key factor in affecting students' interest towards the subject.

Keywords: Islamic education, students' interest, religious education

1. Introduction

The learning of Islamic education is essential for every Muslim because it is a gateway for knowing Islam and its teachings. Through Islamic education, the character building of a good Muslim as an individual and a member of society would be developed. Islamic education plays a significant role in a Muslim's life as asserted by Syed Ali Ashraf (1985: 24) who defines Islamic education as "an education which trains the sensibility of pupils in such a manner that in their attitude to life, their actions and decisions and approach to all kinds of knowledge, they are governed by the deeply felt ethical values of Islam."

Realising the importance of Islamic education as the medium for inculcating Islamic teachings and values into Muslim students, it is therefore very important to sustain students' interest in learning this subject. However, studies conducted on the teaching and learning of Islamic education at schools reported that students were not interested or had lesser interest to learn the subject (for example, see Nik Rosila, 2007; Aiiri, 2003; Dk Hajah Nur Ashikin, 2002; Mohamad Sahari & Hassan Langgulong, 1999; Abdul Aziz, 1995). In fact, the lack of interest among students to learn Islamic education would create a barrier between them and Islamic teachings, and as a result, the noble aims of Islamic education would not be materialised. Muslim students are supposed to have deep interest towards Islamic education in order to gain deep understanding of their religion. However, when they are not interested in learning it, efforts need to be taken to improve the teaching and learning of Islamic education. Since interest can motivate learning, knowing the factors that could influence students' interest is very important. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the factors that affect students' interest in learning Islamic education.

2. Factors which influence students' interest in Islamic education

Interest has been recognised by researchers as a motivational factor that may influence learning and performance (for example, see Ainley, Hidi & Berndorf, 2002; Shen, Chen & Guan, 2007; Quimby, Seyala & Wolfson, 2007; Richards, 2007; Harakiewicz, Durik, Barron, Garcia & Tauer, 2008; Morales, 2008).

There are two types of interest that have been the primary focus of educational research namely: situational and

individual interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Individual interest has been described as a relatively enduring predisposition to attend to certain objects and events and to engage in certain activities (e.g., Krapp, 1992; Renninger, 1992, 2000), whereas situational interest is the psychological state of interest that can be generated by specific environmental stimuli (Hidi & Baird, 1988 as cited in Ainley, Hidi & Berndorff, 2002). According to Hidi and Renninger (2006), individual interest and situational interest are interrelated and can be expected to interact and influence each other's development. They asserted that situational interest, triggered by environmental factors may evoke or contribute to the development of long-lasting individual interests. Perhaps, in order to increase students' interest, these two types of interest need to be considered by educators in the field of teaching.

It was found that not much study has been made on the factors that affect students' interest in learning Islamic education. However, previous researches had mentioned several problems of Islamic education which can be regarded as the factors that contribute to affect students' interest in learning Islamic education. Among the problems are:

2.1 The influence of parents on their children

Parents are the first teachers for children and they should prepare themselves by learning religion in order to answer their children's questions about religious matters (Abdullah Nasih Ulwan, 1988). In a research conducted by Siti Rashidah (2005), she found out that most of the problematic students at schools did not have positive attitudes towards Islamic education. These students were also not interested in practicing Islamic teachings since their parents also neglected it. Highlighting the same issue, Abdul Aziz (1995) asserted that one of the reasons for students' low interest towards Islamic education was the lack of exposure to Islamic teachings by their parents. Abdul Halim Tamuri (2007) also mentioned that the students who had received initial religious education in their families showed more positive responses during lessons.

2.2 The influence of Islamic education teachers as a role model for students

According to Halstead (2004), since teachers have a special responsibility to nurture the young and develop their spiritual and moral awareness, their lives, beliefs, character and moral integrity are as important as their academic expertise. Abdul Aziz (1995) in his research found out that Islamic education teachers were not portraying good personality and characteristics and therefore, they failed to be a role model for students. In another survey by Mohamad Sahari and Hassan Langgulung (1999), students were found to be not satisfied with their Islamic education teachers' characteristics. The students reasoned that some of the teachers did not internalize things that they had been preaching.

2.3 The weakness of pedagogy in teaching Islamic Education

Abdul Rahman Salih (1982) asserted that the importance of the educational methods comes from the fact that the content of any curriculum cannot be learned efficiently unless it is presented in a specific way. Inadequacy of methods may handicap learning and cause undue wastage of effort and time. Jarolimek, Foster & Kellough (2005) as cited in Jacobsen, Eggen & Kauchak (2006) highlighted learner diversity that influences learning. According to Jarolimek et al., the children we teach differ in significant ways, including their physical characteristics, interests, home lives, intellectual abilities, learning capacities, motor abilities, social skills, aptitude and talents, language skills, background experiences, ideals, aptitude, hopes, and dreams. In this case, teachers are encouraged to use a variety of materials in a multimedia approach to vary the learning experiences.

The positive effect of using instructional technology to assist students' learning is overwhelmingly discussed by educational researchers but not many Islamic education teachers are interested to benefit from it. Rosnani (2004) has criticized the methodology of teaching Islamic education in Malaysia. She asserted that the most frequent instructional methods are reading, narrations of stories from the Qur'an and the *Hadith* (sayings and tradition of Prophet Muhammad), lectures, dictation of notes, and memorization. She had suggested that Islamic educators should expand their pedagogical methods in accordance with the changing times. In agreement with that, some teachers admitted that they were unable to use many of the teaching methods or activities suggested in the curriculum and often resorted to lectures only (Abdul Halim Tamuri, 2007). In a survey conducted by Mohamad Sahari and Hasan Langgulung (1999), 93.1% of the respondents agreed that the traditional methods of teaching and the teachers' failure to use audio-visual aids as reasons for the students' poor attitude towards the teaching of Islamic education in schools.

2.4 *The weakness of Islamic education curriculum*

Although some modifications have been made in the curriculum of Islamic education in Malaysia, it seems that it has failed to cater the needs for the holistic development of a Muslim. The increasing immoral activities among the students are a signal that the curriculum of Islamic education needs to be revised (Abdul Halim Tamuri, 2007; Rosnani, 1998; Mohd.Arif, 1998). In the new integrated curriculum, the use of *jawi* script (an Arabic alphabet for writing the Malay language) has been imposed on Islamic education. However, researches conducted on Islamic education found that the requirement to use *jawi* script as one of the reasons for the lack of interest among students to learn Islamic education. For example, in a survey conducted by Mohamad Sahari and Hassan Langgulong (1999), 82.5% of the respondents yielded that the textbooks written in *jawi* script, each of which used varied and inconsistent spelling rules, affected school children's attitude towards Islamic education. In addition, the content of the textbook and its presentation is considered as too detailed and outdated by the respondents. Furthermore, students who cannot read the *jawi* script do not receive maximum benefit from the textbooks but depend merely on the teachers' explanation in the classroom or on other sources that are written in the Roman script (Abdul Halim Tamuri, 2007).

3. Methods

An in depth semi-structured interview had been applied in this qualitative study for collecting the data. Semi-structured interview allows for focused, conversational, two-way communication, which is preferable in exploring and discussing one's experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Six Form Four students aged 16 from a school in the state of Selangor (in central Malaysia) had been interviewed in order to gain better understanding of the research phenomenon.

The reason for using a small sample size in this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the issue. According to Kvale (1996) as cited in Nik Suryani (2008), the number of subjects depends on a study's purpose. For example if the purpose is to explore and describe in detail the attitudes of boys and girls towards grades, the necessary sample maybe as small as three boys and three girls.

Sharing the same view with Kvale, Creswell (2008) asserted that it is typical in qualitative research to study a few individuals or a few cases. Because of the need to report details about each individual or site, the larger number of cases can become unwieldy and result in superficial perspectives. Moreover, collecting qualitative data and analyzing takes considerable time, and the addition of each individual or site only lengthens that time.

3.1 *Credibility and Trustworthiness*

The integrity of qualitative research depends on attending the issue of validity. The term most frequently used by qualitative researchers to refer to this characteristic is credibility. Credibility in qualitative research concerns the truthfulness of the inquiry's findings (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002). According to Creswell (2005), validating findings means that the researcher determines the accuracy or credibility of the findings through strategies such as member checking or triangulation.

Since the main focus of this research is to explore and understand the research phenomenon from the informants' views, only the informants can determine whether the data from the interviews is accurately presented or not. Therefore, the researcher had conducted 'member checking' as a form of 'validity check' by returning to the informants to determine if the essence of the interviews has been correctly 'captured' (Hycner, 1999). Member checking is the process in which the researcher asks the participant in the study to check the accuracy of the findings by taking the findings back to the participant (Creswell, 2005). Interestingly, during the member checking process, all of the participants supported the data and confirmed its accuracy.

3.2 *Reliability*

After completing the process of transcribing and coding, it is very essential to ensure the reliability of the coded interviews. At this stage, the researcher applied an inter-rater reliability to check the accuracy of the initial coding of the discourse units. Inter-rater reliability is a procedure made by two or more individuals of an individual's or several individual's behavior (i.e. observation) or response (i.e. interview) by recording their scores of that behavior or response and then comparing their scores to see if their scores are similar or different (Creswell, 2005).

For this study, two co-raters had been appointed to identify the main ideas of a random selection of the discourse units. Both of the co-raters had a wide experience in teaching. After the co-raters had completed their tasks, the

reliability of the researcher's coding was calculated by finding the percentage of agreement between the coding of the researcher and the two co-raters on the random selection of discourse units for each interview question. For six interviews, the average of inter-rater reliability for each interview was calculated as more than 80%, which can be considered as relatively high. This indicated that the coded transcriptions were reliable.

4. Discussion

This study reveals that there are certain factors which affect students' interest in learning Islamic education. Below are the influential factors that had been identified:

4.1 Learner's initial interest and diversity in learning

The syllabus of Islamic education for Form Four comprises different components such as *tilawah al-qur'an* (Quranic recitation), *ibadah* (Islamic practices or worship), *adab* (ethics), *sirah* (history) and *tamaddun Islam* (Islamic civilization). It was found that the students had different levels of interest for each of these subjects. Some were interested in *sirah* or *ibadah* while some were not. Because of having no or less interest, they regard certain lessons as boring and difficult. The various responses shown by the students while learning Islamic education also indicate that learner diversity occurred in the classroom.

4.2 Parents' influence on their children

From the interviews, it was learnt that all of the informants were motivated by their parents to learn Islamic education. They were also encouraged by their parents to practise the teachings of Islam such as performing prayers, observing the Islamic dress code and observing Islamic ethics. Based on the findings, it was concluded that parents are influential in moulding students' character and their Islamic worldview.

4.3 Islamic Education Teachers' influence on the students

In this study, Islamic education teachers' influence will be discussed from two aspects; i.e.: teachers as a role model for students and instructional approaches used by Islamic education teachers to deliver information to the students.

4.3.1 Islamic education teachers as a role model for students

The findings indicate that most of the informants were satisfied with their Islamic education teachers' personality and behaviour. They agreed that their Islamic education teachers deserve to be a role model for the students. Only one informant voiced out that not all Islamic education teachers are perfect. Thus, it describes that among Islamic education teachers, there are a few of them who are not fully aware of their responsibility to be a role model for the students and behaved unexpectedly.

4.3.2 Instructional approaches used by Islamic education teachers

The findings revealed that most of them used different methods of teaching such as giving lectures, applying storytelling and cooperative learning such as discussions and making presentations in groups and conducting play activities when delivering the lessons to their students. Generally, they do not merely practise the 'teacher-centred' approach as always criticised by many researchers in this field. Also, most of them are not using instructional technology to enhance the teaching and learning process of Islamic education. According to the students, very few of their Islamic education teachers made an effort to use multimedia presentations or audio visual materials when teaching the subject. They were rarely brought to the school resource centre which had these facilities.

4.4 Curriculum of Islamic education

Only two elements of the curriculum will be highlighted; i.e.: the contents of the Islamic education textbook and the use of *jawi* script in teaching and learning Islamic education. This is because students always dealt with textbooks and the *jawi* script when learning Islamic education. Hence, these two elements are considered as

influential to affect students' interest towards the subject.

4.4.1 The Contents of Islamic Education Textbook

The findings indicate that there are two groups of students; i.e.: students who can easily understand the topics and their contents, and students who faced problems in understanding the topics and the content of the textbooks. The latter group of students reasoned that the organisation of the contents in the textbooks affected their understanding. They usually sought help from the Islamic education teacher to give more explanation or referred to the supplementary books commercially sold which they found easier to comprehend than the textbooks. For them, these supplementary books are better because the content is more organised and not as complex as their textbooks.

4.4.2 The Use of *Jawi* script in Teaching and Learning Islamic Education

The findings indicate that most of the students did not regard it as a problem in learning the subject since they mastered the *jawi* script. They were exposed to *jawi* script at the young age and used to read and write the script since they were in primary school. However, all of the informants admitted that there were students in their classrooms who could not read and write the *jawi* script and faced problems in learning Islamic education. According to them, during the lessons of Islamic education, those students who did not master the *jawi* script used to refer to supplementary books which are written in Roman characters because they could not understand their teacher's writing or the textbooks which are written in *jawi* script.

Each of the factors that have been mentioned above contributed significantly to influence students' interest in learning Islamic education. Nevertheless, the findings of this study disclosed that teachers' influence is the key factor in affecting students' interest to learn the subject. It was found that students' interest towards the subject was highly related to the teaching strategies used by their Islamic education teachers. The students depended heavily on their teachers to provide a meaningful learning experience to them.

The findings also indicate that students' interest can be influenced by certain situational factors. Despite the fact that students have different levels of interest in learning Islamic education, the interest that resides within each individual can be developed by creating environmental factors or situational interest that can enhance their learning experience. In this case, the findings supported the development of interest that has been proposed by Hidi and Renninger (2006). Both of them indicate that situational interest triggered by environmental factors may evoke or contribute to the development of long-lasting individual interest. In relation to that, the major factors that influence students' interest in learning Islamic education have been divided into two kinds which are 'situational factors' and 'individual factors.'

5. Conclusion

The concern of this study is to identify the factors that influence students' interest in learning Islamic education. Based on the findings, students' interest in learning Islamic education was influenced by two major factors; i.e. individual factors and situational factors. Both factors are interrelated whereby an initial interest in any individual can be developed or deepened by situational interest that provides meaningful learning experience for each student. On the other hand, the interest that exists within each student may decrease if the environment does not support the process of learning. In order to enhance the teaching and learning of Islamic education, students' interest needs to be inculcated so that they do not only study it, but also put what they study into practice. Therefore, it is important to create situational interest that will support students' learning of Islamic education as well as to regain their interest towards the subject.

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