

TAHFIZ SCHOOLS ENTRY REQUIREMENT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF TAHFIZ STUDENTS

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Abstract

Tahfiz education is among the growing education that has gained attraction among Malaysians nowadays. The establishment of Tahfiz schools by government and private sector is a clear sign that the Tahfiz education will start to fill mainstream education in Malaysia. In line with this, the study is conducted to explore the characteristics of Tahfiz students and to understand what are the main criteria of admission for Tahfiz schools. This study is a qualitative research and eight students from three Tahfiz schools were involved as research participants. The findings showed several important criteria for the admission to tahfiz schools. The entry requirement would require the applicants to go through several important interviews. Among the criteria evaluated by the interviewers are the ability to read Quran and the understanding of the tajwid, memorizing abilities, academic excellence, student interests and attitudes. The findings provided important implications that are important for Tahfiz schools to have a clear standard in selecting their students. This will help the school and parents, especially in training and preparing their children for Tahfiz school entry in order to produce more Huffaz (those who memorize the entire Qur'an).

Keywords: Tahfiz schools, Tahfiz students, Characteristics of Tahfiz students, Entry Requirement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, memorizing the Qur'an in Malaysia takes place in Pondok (traditional religious school) Tahfiz. The emergence of religious education in Malaysia as early as 1966 with the establishment of Tahfiz (memorization process) Institution by First Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj. At that time, Sheikh al-Azhar Sheikh Mahmud Syaltut sparked the idea for the establishment of religious schools, during his visit to Malaysia at the opening of the National Mosque. Finally Tahfiz Institution Quran wa al-Masjid Negara Qiraat operates with eight students at the beginning (Azmil Hashim, 2012).

Nowadays, Malaysian Muslim parents in urban and rural areas are becoming more inclined to send their children to tahfiz schools as they are confident that these institutions would help form good character among their children. Therefore, the implementation of the Ulul Albab Tahfiz Model (TMUA) under the supervision of the Ministry of Education is expected to produce 10,920 students who are able to memorise all 30 chapters of the Quran by 2021 (*Bernama* report). Head of the ministry's Religious School Development Sector, Hassan Nudin A. Hamid said 15 national religious secondary schools (SMKA) and fully-residential schools selected nationwide would take part in this effort to produce professionals who could memorise the Quran.

"Carrying out this Islamic education model will involve 1,092 tahfiz teachers based on one teacher to 10 students ratio accepted by the Public Service Department," he said when presenting working paper titled "Tahfiz School Stream in Malaysia: Contributions, Current Challenges and Potential".

On July 10, Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin launched the TMUA Islamic education model, with the pioneer project carried out at SMKA Kedah, SMKA Kuala Lumpur and Sekolah Menengah Agama Persekutuan (SMAP) Bentong. "The education model proves the government's commitment to ensure students who study to memorise the Quran have the same opportunity as students studying the normal national school curriculum, to further their studies. "Students under the TMUA will sit for the ministry's examinations including the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia and this qualification will allow them to enter university at the diploma, matriculation or foundation level in Malaysia or abroad." The TMUA will also indirectly provide an alternative to parents who want their children to be a tahfiz but also hold professional posts such as doctor, accountant or engineer," he said. At the presentation, Hassan Nudin also informed that data from 2011 showed there were 278 registered tahfiz schools nationwide, with 14 of them under the supervision of the federal or state government while the remaining were privately owned. – *Bernama*.

1.1 Problem Statement

The process of memorizing the Quran is not an easy task. It requires skill, patience and the correct and effective techniques to ensure the quality of memorization, as well as the support from conducive environment. Challenges faced by students of Tahfiz need considerable research to be conducted in order to explore and review the problems and challenges faced. For example, a study by Misnan Jemali and Ahmad Dadi (2003) recorded 60% of students did not successfully complete the tahfiz memorizing the schedule for six semesters. Challenges faced by students need to be identified to assist these students to face these challenges and some of the findings showed that the quality of memorizing performance can be improved. Especially in the context of selecting the students and school entry requirement.

Therefore, this research is important in assessing what is the criteria for Tahfiz schools entry requirement and students characteristics to be look into as to make sure the students selected for this programme are highly qualified. The strict entry requirements for Tahfiz school has led to fewer intakes annually (Government Schools). The strict entry requirement would require the applicants to go through two initial interviews. The first interview was to find out whether the applicants were able to read the Quran. Then for the second interview, the applicant's ability in memorizing the Quran will be evaluated. Hence, this research will focus on the criteria set by the Tahfiz schools as their entry requirement as the tahfiz students would hold great responsibility such as safeguarding their image as al Huffaz (those who memorize the entire Qur'an) in terms of characteristics, personality and attitude. Therefore, the process of interview should be more cautious in selecting their students and this research is done in order to explore what are the criteria assessed by the panel of interviewers of Tahfiz School.

1.2 Objectives

This study aims to examine the criteria of entry requirement for Tahfiz schools in Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Memorizing the Quran is a challenging task. It requires certain skills before they can begin memorizing the Quran, for instance their reading skills must be good as well as their knowledge on Tajwid (Wan Ariffin et al, 2013). Memorizing the Quran is Fardu kifayah (obligatory to ensure the verses of al-Quran is preserved). Individuals who memorized the Quran or hafiz and hafizah will be bestowed and choosed by Allah (Surah Fatir, verse 32). In a hadith, the Prophet S.A.W. once said, which means: (Read the Quran because it will come on the Day of Resurrection to intercede those who read the Quran). Similarly, in another hadith, the Prophet said which means: (The best of you is the one who learns the Qur'an and teach it). Based on the verses and hadith mentioned above, the rationale for many individuals who memorize the Quran is that who read the Quran most. Thus, the advantages mentioned above are among the advantages that can be gained by individuals who memorize the Quran (Mohd Yusuf Ahmad, 2005) ,

The challenge for Tahfiz education is to ensure the memorization and attainment of 30 chapters of Quranic verses been achieved. In a study conducted by Ahmad Misnan and Dadi, (2003), approximately 60% of students did not successfully complete the memorizing of 30 Chapter of Al Quran within six semesters. Similarly, a study conducted by Azmil Hashim (Azmil, Ab. Halim and Misnan, 2013) on student achievement of Tahfiz school at Darul Quran and MTQN which found student achievement has yet to achieve the objective of memorizing the Quran smoothly, memorize the Quran to understand the meaning of the verses,

memorize the Quran to know and memorize the verses, asbab nuzul and to know the Quranic teaching. This was stated by Abdul Hafiz Abdullah and Hasimah Muda (2004) that students enrolled in the Tahfiz education were not all able to maintain their memorization.

In a study, it was found that tahfiz learning has a significant relationship with achievement of memorization. This signals that the importance of learning manners to apply appropriate and effective technique to ensure the quality of memorization (Azmil Hashim, 2014). In addition, the technique of memorizing in the correct way and accurate should be taught to facilitate the memorization process. These include the launch of the constituents or memorizing short and simple verses as chapter 30, 29, 28, 27 and 26. On the other hand, the technique of repeating the verses again and again and *tasmi'* for example reciting the Quran with friends is also among the techniques that help the students to memorize the Quran. All these approaches should be considered by the interviewer in selecting the Tahfiz students. As such the tahfiz students were not only skilful in memorising the Quran but could also excell in professional fields in the future.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach. Eight students were involved as participants in this study. Qualitative method was chosen because it can provide information about the study (Creswell, 2003). In-depth interviews were used as data collection methods to obtain data related to the experience and views of the eight participants in this study. The results were analyzed using thematic analysis of themes available and understood by the interview excerpts with participants studied (Othman Lebar, 2009). All the interviews were being recorded and transcribed.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, there are several characteristics of students who enroll in Tahfiz schools. These characteristics are in accordance with the prerequisite set by Tahfiz schools as their school entry requirements. Among the characteristics of these students are the ability to read the Quran, the ability to memorize the Quran, as well as excellence in academic and religious subjects and have passion for Tahfiz and parent support.

The ability to memorize the Quran is the main characteristic being said by all participants. These characteristics are being assessed and given priority in the selection of students to enter Tahfiz schools. For example, student A stated that:

"The first question I got an hour before an interview began.. they gave me a few surah to read..and one hour after that, the interviewer call me in, to memorize the required surah". (Student A)

Similarly, shared by student B, he explained that in the interview process " he had been asked to memorize Surah Al-Baqarah page 6". Student C also stated the same thing, and suggested that the ability to memorize Quran is more focused on ordinary verses read daily. He explained, "The interviewer assesed their capability to memorize the short surah in Al Quran". Students D also shared the same experience when he attended the interview. He recounted that:

"We have to read the Quran (selected Surah) in half an hour. Then we need to memorize those Surah in front of the inteviewers, as best as we could. They choose random pages from the holy Quran and ask me to memorise the whole page within 45 minutes. The candidates would be tested on how many lines they could memorise." (Student D)

The second characteristic focused in the interview was the ability to read the Quran. Although there are schools that do not state directly on test of assessing the ability to read the Quran, but the test of memorization and recitation the Quran was among the essential characteristics for students who want to follow the Tahfiz programme. Student F explained the interview process that he went through was for two days and one night, and he was assesed to read the Quran in tajwid.

"After maghrib prayer, we have Talaqi. The interviewer wants to hear our Quranic reading." (Student F)

Student G also deals with the same thing. Apart from memorizing the Quran, the panel of interviewer also assessed the fluency of Quranic reading. He said;

"The interview conducted here is in memorizing the Quran and reading Quran fluently". (Student G)

Meanwhile, student H clearly told that his experiences being interviewed for Tahfiz school admission was as follows:

“The interview was conducted for two days, in the evening the teacher will give the verses to the candidates to see if they can read the Quran or not with tajwid”. (Students H)

While four other participants acknowledged that the test selections into the Tahfiz school are more focused on the ability to memorize the Quran. But in the process of memorizing the Quran, the panel of interviewers assessed the abilities of students to read the Quran fluently with tajwid. In line with the above statement, al-Hafiz (2010) added that those who memorized the Qur'an need to understand the general meaning of the verse, collect information therein, and recognize the meaning between one verse and another verse. Moreover, those who memorize the Quran must know how to recite the Quran very well.

The next characteristic of entry qualification is having academic excellence. These were recognized by all the participants interviewed. Some participants noted that they have obtained excellent results in academic and religious subjects. In the Malaysian context, (UPSR examination) of academic and examination of religion refers to the religious examinations carried out in their respective states. So the students need to excell in both areas. In addition, written tests were also being conducted in order to test the ability of students in terms of academic and religious knowledge. For example, a student explained that he had to undergo the Mathematics, Language and Science written tests, he explained:

“The test was about Mathematics, Bahasa Melayu, English, Science and Arabic.” (Student A)

Next, students B also cited the same things, namely the panel of interviewers will considered the academic excellence and emphasized on the religious knowledge.

“I was able to get 5A, and mumtaz for religious subject?” (Student B)

It was also recognized by the Student D which he stated that 'Must get 5A (academic) and UPSR (A) (religious subjects) straight A's' when he applied for admission to Tahfiz schools. Similarly with student M, '...I must undergo the test about religious knowledge.'

Similarly said by student G “the candidates will be asked about academic i.e Mathematics, religious subject and current issues as well as general knowledge”.

The final participant student H stated that “academic achievement and religious aspects were highlighted in the interview for Tahfiz schools enrollment.”

The teaching and learning involved in the memorization of the Qur'an should not deny the integration of other subjects related with the Qur'anic sciences and academic as well. The teaching system too will give more benefit if there is no dichotomy in these subjects). Therefore, curriculum integration of the two or more disciplines of knowledge is necessary. Therefore, the admission of Tahfiz schools should also considered the students' academic excellence in Math, Sciences, Languages etc.

Apart from academic excellence based on the results of UPSR and Religious certificates such as UPSRA or PSRA, the aspect of interest and passion also being assessed by the interviewer panel. Through the findings, it showed that the interviewer panel conducted oral interview sessions to identify the interest of the Tahfiz students.

The findings showed that students usually being encouraged or motivated by their parents. Hence, the panel of interviewers also asked about the interest and support received from candidates' parent. As such, parents support and students' interest are important in this interview (Tahfiz school admission). Apart from parent support, the interest of students also can be nurtured by school programmes and teachers, as well as those who are close to the students, the students should be guide to endeavor for this programme. For example, students A honestly said that;

“The one who keep pushing me into this programme is my mother”.

“At first, there is no interest but eventually the interest developed after I joined the school..the school help me and motivated me to enroll in Tahfiz programme”. (Student A)

The same thing was told by Student B, he said, 'I think the main thing that drives me to enroll in this programme is my mother. My parent was very eager that I took the course.'

Student C also explained that” his parents are the main factor why he choose Tahfiz programme”.

Student E also expressed the same thing about the motivation and support from his parent. Thus his father especially send many of his siblings to the Tahfiz school.

“My father who encourage me to study here. This is because my father's dream to ensure that all six

children are Huffaz (those who memorize the entire Qur'an)." (Student E)

Meanwhile, Student F said that he himself who interested to join the Tahfiz school. He explained that, 'I really want to get in here, and I'm really interested with Tahfiz programme, as well as science subjects and want to further my study in Al-Azhar University.'

Finally, students G and H share a similar story that their mothers who inspired them to study in Tahfiz school. This is expressed through the conversations below;

"My mother who asked me to join Tahfiz." (Murid G)

While the student H did admit that his mother asked him to attend the interview (Tahfiz school) although he was initially unsure about it.

"My mother asked me to apply for the Tahfiz school..." (Student H)

It is a major function of Tahfiz school to manage, select and evaluate applications for admission into the Tahfiz programme. The main task of the school Tahfiz panel of interviewers is to manage and process applications for admission of candidates into the programmes offered by the Tahfiz school. In executing the task, the panel interviewers from Tahfiz schools must ensure that selected candidates have good academic qualifications, have the ability to read Quran and memorizing abilities and the understanding of the tajwid and at the same time the school is able to achieve its projected number of student intake.

5. CONCLUSION

Since the findings from this study are derived from a limited number of respondents (i.e. from three Tahfiz Schools), a larger sample size from many more Tahfiz school should be included to enable several statistical analyses to be employed before general conclusion can be derived. This research applied qualitative method; therefore, in order to gain further and in depth information with regard to methods taught at Tahfiz institutions, it is suggested that both qualitative and quantitative approaches be utilized. These two approaches if applied, would allow more robust statistical test be conducted, which would lead to a more accurate, reliable and valid finding, especially in testing the differences with respect to methods used in selecting the students. Many issues have to be taken into considerations by Tahfiz Schools when choosing their students.

As a conclusion, based on the findings, there are several key characteristics identified as the main focus in selection of Tahfiz students. These characteristics include the ability to memorize the Quran, the ability to read the Quran, possessed academic excellence, showed interest and passion in Tahfiz programme as well as supported by family. These four characteristics are significant in this study and these elements need to be look into as to ensure the ability of students to be selected for tahfiz programme are qualified.

These characteristic would be guidance for parents in preparing their children to enter Tahfiz schools. Parents could use these characteristic as a preparation before sending their children to the Tahfiz schools. As for the teachers and Tahfiz schools, the findings would give them such significant guidance. They could focus on more effective selection criteria of Tahfiz students. They could also plan for support programmes in order to promote the quality of the students. Lastly but not least, the findings would posed the Ministry of Education to set certain standards for the selection of Tahfiz students. The Tahfiz education is in need of methods and processes and appropriately structured to help them adapt to their learning process that quite challenging. Therefore, the selection of Tahfiz students should be made with caution. It is a hope that students studying in Tahfiz schools would be able to analyze academic subjects with the Quran and share their Islamic knowledge to the development of the country.

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