

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 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 the main criteria of admission for Tahfiz schools are. This article aims to review and analyze the criteria being used to select Tahfiz students. This study is a qualitative research and eight students from three Tahfiz schools were randomly selected as research respondents. 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 recite the Quran with correct pronunciation of tajweed, 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 school and parents, especially in training and preparing their children for Tahfiz school entrance 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). 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, 2012). Tahfiz schools are institutions that are accountable in educating students who can memorize and recite the whole Al-Quran. The number of tahfiz centers in Malaysia has grown from only 58 in 1999 to 278 in 2011 and more than 91% of them are privately owned (Hamidah, Maheran, Abd Halim, Muhammad Mukhlis, 2014).

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 memorize all 30 chapters of the Quran by 2021 (*Bernama* report). Head of 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 memorize 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 of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin launched the TMUA Islamic education model, with the pioneer project carried out at SMKA Kedah, SMKA Kuala Lumpur and SMKA Persekutuan (SMAP) Bentong. "The education model proves the government's commitment to ensure students who study to memorize 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 Malaysia Education Certificate 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". 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. Past researches showed that 60% of students did not successfully complete the memorizing of the Quran (30 chapters) within the schedule time of six semesters (Misnan & Ahmad Sadadi, 2003). Regarding the issues to finish memorizing the Quran in a set of time, it shows the importance of the quality of students' personnel (Tahfiz students). Memorizing refer to the activities of memorizing the Quran (30 chapters). Therefore, those who are involved in memorizing the Quran, require certain characteristics to facilitate the learning process.

Effective education is not only depends on the teachers and teaching methods alone. Instead, the aspects of students' readiness and personality is the key element to the success and effectiveness of this education programme (Blank & Alas, 2009). Thus, the study on the characteristics of Tahfiz students and Tahfiz school entry requirement is essential to ensure the effective learning of Tahfiz education. Research on the characteristics of Tahfiz students could indirectly give recommendations to the Tahfiz schools to develop their school entrance evaluation to be more comprehensive.

Thus, there is a need to have a standard indicator on the Tahfiz schools entry requirement. Many Tahfiz schools can use these indicators to select their students. This study aims to fill this gap by proposing the indicators for Tahfiz schools entry requirement. This indicator will help the Ministry of Education (Ulul Albab Tahfiz Model (TMUA)) to select qualified students for Tahfiz programme. In addition, challenges faced by Tahfiz students also need to be identified to assist the students to face the challenges, and some of the findings showed that the quality of the education can be improved if the selected students possess good qualities and characteristics especially in the context of the recital and memorizing the Quran. Therefore, this research is important in assessing what is the criteria for Tahfiz schools entrance requirement and students' characteristics to be look into as to make sure the selected students for this programme are highly qualified.

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 Tajweed (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 entire Quran will be bestowed 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, 2005).

The memorization process of the Quran encompasses three stages; learning the Al-Quran by heart, memorizing and perfecting the ability to write the whole Quran on paper or slate without any error (Taiwo, 2014). The Talaqqi method (face to face or deal with teachers) and Musyafahah method (word of mouth with lip-reading teacher watching to get the correct pronunciation of tajweed) are being used in enhancing the learning and memorization of the Quran (Mustafa & Basri, 2014).

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 Misnan and Ahmad Sadadi, (2003), approximately 60% of students did not successfully complete the memorizing of 30 Chapters of the Quran within six semesters. Similarly, a study conducted by Azmil, Ab. Halim and Misnan, (2013) on Tahfiz students' achievement 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 and Hasimah (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, 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 recite the Quran with friends is also among the techniques that help the students to memorize the Quran. All these approaches should be consider by the interviewer in selecting the Tahfiz students. As such, the Tahfiz students were not only skillful in memorizing the Quran but could also excel in professional fields in the future. Furthermore, this is in line with the implementation of the Ulul Albab Tahfiz Model (TMUA) under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Ulul Albab programme is an educational program of integration between the programs available (Science streaming) with the religious school program including Tahfiz Al-Quran. Ulul Albab education programmes will give birth this Albab professional experts, and entrepreneurs' technocrats well versed in the field of religion-based the Quran and Sunni (Mohd Shahril, 2013).

Basically, 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 meticulously in selecting Tahfiz students and this research is done in order to explore what are the criteria asses by the panel of interviewers of Tahfiz School.

3 METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach. The study was conducted in three Tahfiz schools in Selangor, Malaysia. Eight students were randomly selected from three Tahfiz schools and those students involved are Tahfiz students who have passed the selection processes. 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 respondents. The results were analyzed using thematic analysis of themes

available and understood by the interview excerpts with respondents (Othman, 2009). All the interviews were being recorded and transcribed.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, there are several characteristics of students (enroll in Tahfiz schools) have been analyzed. 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 recite the Quran, the ability to memorize the Quran, as well as excel in academic and religious subjects, have passion for Tahfiz education and parent support. Therefore, the discussion of this study will be arranged based on important themes analyzed.

4.1 The Ability to Recite the Quran

The first characteristic focused in the interview was the ability to read or recite the Quran. Although there are schools that specifically do not state and focus on students ability to recite the Quran, but the test of memorization and recitation of 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 he was asses to recite the Quran and also being asked about the correct pronunciation of tajweed.

“After maghrib prayer, we have a Talaqqi. The interviewer want to hear our Quran recital.”

(Student F)

Student G also deals with the same thing. Apart from memorizing the Quran, the panel of interviewers also assess the smoothness of Quranic reading. He said;

“The interview conducted here is in memorizing the Quran and reading Quran smoothly”.

(Student G)

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

“The interview was conducted for two days, in the evening the teacher call the candidates to recite the Quran and evaluate their abilities (with the correct pronunciation of tajweed)”.

(Students H)

While four other respondents acknowledged that the test selection into the Tahfiz School are more focused on the ability to memorize the Quran. In the process of memorizing the Quran, the panel of interviewers assessed the abilities of students to recite the Quran smoothly with the correct pronunciation of tajweed. In line with the above statement, Abdul Hafiz and Hasimah (2004) 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 with the correct pronunciation of tajweed.

4.2 The Ability to Memorize the Quran

Based on the interviews carried out by the researcher with the selected students showed that the main important aspect being asked by the interviewers is the students’ ability to memorize the Quran. All the respondents said that the ability to memorize the Quran is the main characteristic that being assessed and given priority in the selection of Tahfiz students. As such, the Talaqqi method (face to face or deal with teachers or interviewers) and Musyafahah method (word of mouth with lip-reading teacher watching to get the correct pronunciation of tajweed) are being used in enhancing the learning and memorization of the Quran (Mustafa & Basri, 2014). Hence, this method also being used in the evaluation process of Tahfiz students enrollment.

For example, student A stated that:

“The first question I got an hour before an interview begin... they gave me a few surah to recite; 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 the Quran is given more focused by the panel interviewers especially on the ordinary verses read daily. He explained, "*The interviewer asses our abilities to memorize the short surah in the Quran*". Student 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 interviewers, as best as we could. They choose random pages from the holy Quran and ask me to memorize the whole page within 45 minutes. The candidates would be tested on how many lines they could memorize."
(Student D)

This theme is in line with the research by Sedek et al. (2013) that said memorizing is one of the techniques used by ancient scholars in preservation of the Quran. Memorizing the Quran is not an easy thing to be done by every Muslim, Quran memorization process requires the person to have some skills beforehand; that was to recite Qur'an smoothly with the correct pronunciation of tajweed. Only then someone began to memorize the Quran. Much research on tahfiz centers has been conducted on memorization techniques (Adnan & Zainul Arifin, 2003; Ariffin et al., 2013; Zulkifli, 2013), and these too showed that students admission to Tahfiz school must undertake the process of Quranic memorization as their entry requirement.

4.3 Academic Excellence

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 Malaysian context, (UPSR or primary school examination) of academic and (UPSRA) refers to the religious examinations. So the students need to excel 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 sit in for Mathematics, Language and Science written tests.

"The test were 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 (UPSR), and mumtaz for religious subject?"

(Student B)

This was also recognized by Student D who stated that '*Must get 5A's (academic) and UPSRA (religious subjects) straight A's*' when he applied for admission to Tahfiz schools. Similarly with student E, '*...I must sit in for the test of religious knowledge.*'

Meanwhile student G said "*the candidates will be asked about academic for example Mathematics, religious subjects and current issues as well as general knowledge*".

The final participant student H stated that "*academic achievement and religious aspects were being emphasized in the interview.*"

The teaching and learning involved in the memorization of the Qur'an should not deny the integration of other subjects related with the Quran, such as Mathematics and Sciences (academic). 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. This finding also in line with the idea of Ulul Albab programme that will give birth to the professional experts that well versed in the field of religion and Tahfiz. Many Tahfiz schools are in target to increase generation of Ulul Albab (to integrate education Qur'an and Science in their curriculum). This case has significant value in the birth of the Muslim community who have a creative thinking abilities, critical and innovation in science but plus the power of appreciation and teaching of the Qur'an (Mohd Shahril, 2013). Thus, the admission to Tahfiz schools should also considered the students' academic excellence in Mathematics, Sciences, Languages and other subjects.

4.4 Interest and Passion

Apart from academic excellence based on the results of UPSR and Religious certificates such as UPSRA or PSRA, the aspect of students' interest and passion also being assessed by the interviewer panel. Through the findings, it showed that the interviewers conducted oral session to identify the interest of the students and asked about their family support.

The findings showed that students usually being encouraged or motivated by their parents. Parents support and students' interest are important criteria in this interview (Tahfiz school enrollment). This study showed that many students received good support from their parents, school and peers 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 memorize the Quran".

(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 and D also explained that their parents is the main factor why they choose Tahfiz programme. Student D said;

"My father is the one who encourages me to study here. This is because my father's dream is to ensure that all six children are Huffaz (those who memorize the entire Qur'an)."

(Student D)

Meanwhile, Student E 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.'*

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

"My mother is the one who asked me to join Tahfiz."

(Student F)

While student G 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..."

Finally, students H reported that his friends who motivated him to study Tahfiz. This is expressed through the conversation below;

"My friends motivated me when I am in bad mood and make me laugh, I always rely on my friends when I have problems..."

(Student H)

Some of the students admitted that the reason they choose Tahfiz programme were due to their parents' decision and interest. This finding is consistent with the study by Mawardi, (2010) that showed correlation between parents' support and interest with the children enrollment in Tahfiz schools. The findings of this study also showed that many students received good support from their parents to enter Tahfiz schools. In addition, students' interest also can be nurtured by school programmes and teachers, as well as those who are close to the students for example peers.

It is a major function of Tahfiz School to manage, select and evaluate candidates of Tahfiz schools. The main task for Tahfiz school interviewers' panel are to manage and process the applications for admission to the Tahfiz programmes. In executing the task, the panel of interviewers must ensure that selected candidates have good academic qualifications, have the ability to recite and memorize the Quran, as well as knowledge of the tajweed. In the meantime the school will able to achieve its projected number of student intake.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on the research that was carried out, it can be concluded there were several key characteristics identified as the main focus in the selection of Tahfiz students. These characteristics include the ability to recite the Quran and memorize, possess academic excellence and interest aspect of the students. These four characteristics are significant in this study and need to be look into as to ensure the ability of the selected students are qualified. However, the findings from this study are derived from a limited number of respondents (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, these characteristic would be a guidance for parents in preparing their children to enter Tahfiz schools. Parents could prepare their children for the interview and train them to recite and memorize the Quran. As for the teachers and Tahfiz schools, the findings would give them such significant guidance. They could focus more on 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 pose 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 appropriate structured to help them adapt to the learning process that quite challenging. Therefore, the selection of Tahfiz students should be made meticulously and it is a hope that by the comprehensive selection process, it will help the school to choose those qualified students only. Some students who have been selected could complete their memorization of the Quran faster, as well as the process of memorized the Quran verses would not be a burden for them, because they have already possess the skill (recital and memorization of the Quran). 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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