

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING: AN ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION NOVICE TEACHERS' PRACTICES

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Abstract: *As an attempt for novice teachers to execute what they have learnt back in teacher training programmes into practices, they have still to face an array of tribulation during their initial years of teaching. New education policies required teachers to centre their students as focus in learning process, yet not all Islamic Education novice teachers able to conduct the learning and learning process by using student-centred teaching approaches. Thus, this study tends to address ten Islamic Education novice teachers' experiences in interpreting their pedagogical-based knowledge during teaching and learning process. They were secondary school's novice teachers from four different states in Malaysia and selected by using purposive sampling. As a source of evidence, qualitative semi-structured individual interviews were employed. The findings revealed on the challenges and issues that they were facing by adjusting to the reality of applying student-centred learning in the classroom.*

Keywords: *Islamic Education Novice Teachers; Teaching Practices; Teacher Training*

Introduction

The beginning five years of teaching experiences for novice teachers normally function as a trial and error process. In light of emphasizing 21st century education, they are expected to be equipped and conducted the teaching and learning process efficaciously as a new educator. As the recent graduates from teacher training programmes, their pedagogical theory-based knowledge that they have obtained is imperative in helping them addressing current education affairs. Regardless of how, novice teachers will face a daunting task on coping with new roles and responsibilities due to transitioning from student-teachers into in-service teachers. They are struggling to translate what they have learned back in their respective programmes and practicing it in school settings. Farrell (2008) claimed that novice teachers will not only learn how to teach once they entered the school, but they have already encountered with a number of factors that can shape them to be competent educators, such as their socialization process during their first year, previous schooling encounter and teacher training programme.

Literature Review

Theoretically, all novice teachers have been exposed with the understanding on teaching and learning during their teaching training. Faryadi (2012) indicated that the functions of teaching and learning theories are to assist students on how to learn effectually as it can be used as a guide to teacher to use a range of methods of designing instruction and teaching methodology. By putting pedagogical practices into focal of the study, it revolves around the appearance of the 21st century education, a technology-friendly that has embodied in our education framework, which comes along with various methods, techniques, strategies, and tools to meet the latest needs. It is also requiring novice teacher to emphasize student as the heart of the learning, and the students are able to independently constructing their knowledge with their current experiences under the guidance of their teachers. This idea is embedded in constructivist theory of student-centered learning where “learning takes place when new information is actively constructed into and added onto an individual’s current structure of knowledge, understanding, and skills” (Pritchard, 2014, p. 18). Equally, Tengku Kasim (2014) described student-centred approach as construction of learning from the student’s own discoveries and focuses on student learning outcomes.

In recent years, most of Islamic Education teachers have embraced the student-centred approaches in their teaching and learning. This stand showed Islamic Education teachers have the awareness to reform their way of teaching and adopt a new teaching. It can be observed from scholars’ research-based findings such as Jasmi (2013) among Islamic Education Excellent teachers use of active learning in their lessons and pointed out the problems arose while implementing it. Hussin, Che Noh, and Tamuri’s (2014) findings stated that student-centred was appeared to be more dominant approach in teaching among Islamic Education Excellent teachers. Similarly, Al-Ghazali (1978) mentioned that a teacher should change his or her teaching methods from time to time in order to obtain effective learning outcomes. Al-Ghazali’s (1978) also asserted that education is not merely a procedure whereby the teacher imparts knowledge that the students may or may not absorb, however, it is an interaction which influencing and benefiting teacher and students similarly by giving learners a practical use of their knowledge.

Student-centred approaches can be traced as active learning, which is one of the elements in the constructivist learning theory that attributed to Vygotsky (1978). By applying this kind of active type of approaches, teachers can train the students to master the sub-topics learned and accelerate the process of understanding the knowledge among themselves. Beyond just to let students be the consumer of knowledge and teachers as the transmitter of knowledge, therefore, teachers should shift their way to teach into letting students be able to produce a simple learning product at the end of the class (Curran & Wetherbee, 2014). Critical exploration as another theory based on constructivism approaches, it challenges the traditional role of teachers as people who convey the knowledge (Hoidn, 2017). In line with current education pace, Islamic Education novice teachers are expected to switch their role from conventional into constructivist approach as it will automatically trigger their creativity to create better strategies in teaching.

Therefore, the critical exploration in the classroom theory in which the experience of an individual will be more meaningful and important when it involves their cognitive and emotional aspects in constructing their beliefs without giving answers (Hoidn, 2017). Duckworth who developed the critical explorations as a notion to explore the students’ thoughts and reflecting the subject’s contents with “wonderful ideas” generated from the questions of their own students (Hoidn, 2017). Teachers who promote critical exploration will support their

students in the face of complex teaching materials, considering various possibilities, and building new understanding (Cavicchi, Chiu, & McDonnell, 2009).

In reality, not all novice teacher, as well as the one who are in Islamic Education field, are able to translate what they have learned back in their respective programmes and practicing it in school settings. There is a volume of published studies that documented the issues regarding novice teachers. The following issues are debated and concerned with novice teachers' implementation of teaching and learning in and outside the classroom, building their social relationships with colleagues or administrators, as well as administrative work to be done besides teaching (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Goh, 2013; Orgoványi-Gajdos, 2015; Oshrat-Fink, 2014).

Thereby, Çakmak (2013) on his analysis, mentioned that novice teachers were grappled with: (1) lack of experiences and confidences, and unable to manage their classroom; (2) facing difficulty on knowing the best way to teach and suit with their students; and (3) theoretically know how to evaluate students, but incapable to practice it in reality. On the other hand, in Finland, the obstacles affecting novice teachers' sense of professional agency, the findings showed that novice teachers discerned many limitations in developing the pedagogical practices such as lack of facilities and time-consuming during preparation and planning (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, & Hökkä, 2015).

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the uses of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) amongst novice teachers are moderate and need extra attention to enhance their skills (Syarifuddin & Halim, 2017). Previous research on two novice teachers who were the products of a twinning programme conducted by *Bahagian Pendidikan Guru* (BPG) has indicated that both teachers were unaware of the importance of teaching strategies in their career. They assumed that teaching strategies only act as a tool to teach and is not embodied in effective lesson procedure (A. Malik, Zakaria, Mohamed, & Sulaiman, 2015). Novice teachers in Malaysia were also reported on encountering problems related to classroom and behavior management as well understanding their students. Even though they are able to establish an appropriate for controlling classes, but learning environment plays a key factor to ascertain the needed strategies and approaches (Goh & Wong, 2014).

In this sense, all novice teachers, including Islamic Education novice teachers in Malaysia are expected to be well trained by their respective institutions and meet the demands of Education industry. Their roles were not restricted to teaching and learning, but on nurturing students to prosper a balanced life as well, which coincides with the expectations of the Ministry of Education who wanted for a holistic education. However, there are limited articles focusing on Malaysian Islamic Education novice teachers. As a new knowledge, this study can contribute to enhancing the quality of teacher training programme, particularly in improving the Islamic education teacher training curriculum design.

Research Objectives

Hence, the objectives of this research are;

1. To identify the application of student-centred learning in Islamic Education novice teachers' classroom.
2. To investigate issues and challenges in Islamic Education novice teacher's pedagogical practices that they encounter during their early years of teaching.

Research Methodology

Researchers opted for qualitative research design resulting from researchers' interest in knowing Islamic education novice teachers' experiences during their teacher training programme as well as during their services as teachers in secondary schools. Qualitative research is a study on laying the purpose of interpreting an occurrence or phenomenon pertaining to the meanings researchers about to uncover (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell also emphasize it as "understanding the meaning people have constructed" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15).

Semi-structured individual interviews were employed to ten Islamic Education novice teachers as a method for data collection. By doing so, researchers have the opportunity on hearing informants' perspectives on their challenges of practicing pedagogical theories during their years of teaching, together with discovering unique findings from it (Creswell, 2007). Flick (2014) claims that semi-structured interviews were a form of open-ended questions that were built as a framework to guide the interviewer on asking in-depth questions. This stand was also supported by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), which suggest that by providing interview protocols can be an easier alternative to gather feedbacks from informants. Due to this viewpoint, researchers have developed interview protocols and it was validated by the panel of experts. Besides that, the interviews took around 45 to 60 minutes, to ensure the data gathered are rich and in-depth.

Research sample recruited in this research chosen by using purposive sampling, in which it is used to determine the important criteria for selecting the research sample (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, the criteria for this study consisted of novice teachers who served less than five years of teaching Islamic Education in Malaysian secondary schools and they were selected from one state from four different zones (north, south, east coast and East Malaysia). In order to maintain informants' personal confidentiality, each teacher Islamic education novice teachers will be introduced as ISNT1 to ISNT10.

Findings and Discussions

The Reality of Applying Student-centred Learning

In order to accommodate world's education trend that appreciating students active participation in learning, the Ministry of Education has introduced Standard Secondary School Curriculum (SSSC) in 2016, a continuation of Standard Primary School Curriculum (SPSC) that was implemented in 2011 (MoE Malaysia, 2016). This new curriculum encourages teachers to use student-centred, integrated, fun teaching and learning strategies and emphasize the development of thinking skills as well as soft skills (MoE Malaysia, 2016). Hence, teachers in Malaysia were expected to execute the 21st century education, which contains selected teaching methodologies, techniques, strategies, and tools to be used in learning and facilitating process (Institut Aminuddin Baki, 2017). Based on the findings, both informants agreed on the advantages of applying 21st century education in their classroom in order to empower student-centred learning. As quoted from ISNT1 and ISNT9;

"21st century education is efficient. It does not need us as a teacher to 100 percent teach in class, or learn by referring to books only." – [ISNT1]

"21st century education.. it is fun for my students. They did not fall asleep in class as they are having fun. That is the specialty of 21st century education." – [ISNT9]

By all means, the concept of student-centred learning highlights student to be more responsible for their learning, construct their own knowledge and teachers should serve as facilitators in the

process of teaching and learning. This stand was underpinned by Tengku Kasim, Abdurajak, Md Yusoff, and Baharuddin (2017) with their findings, in which the students were found to be working independently together with their peers in order to discuss a topic, under the guidance from their Islamic Education teacher. In student-centred environment, “teacher help students to develop a sense of congruence between their classroom behaviour and their inner motivational resources such as psychological needs, interest, goals, values etc.” (Reeve & Jang, 2006, p. 210). This shall be a good guidance in order to form appropriate practices to achieve the desired outcome on students and help to extract their latent skills.

However, some of Islamic Education novice teachers have different views of using 21st century education during their teaching and learning.

“This 21st century education, teachers’ job is only to monitor their students. These new techniques, a lot of it requires students to do the activities by themselves. But for my students, they did not want to cooperate. They want me to show them one by one, even though I already had prepared the activities for them.” – [ISNT7]

“For ‘back classes’, I definitely did not apply 21st century education.” – [ISNT7]

“I rarely use 21st century education in my lesson. Like using ‘gallery walk’ etcs, I did not use it especially for ‘back classes’.” – [ISNT4]

“The concept of practicing 21st century learning is student-centred, right? Therefore, if we try to ask them to come out with a new information is quite hard.” – [ISNT2]

“Maybe the 21st century education is suitable for top classes. If we implement it for back classes, it is so challenging.” – [ISNT5]

“If we implement 21st century education, we have to conduct activities to make it fun and active. But the reality is, the time is not enough. It is quite impossible to finish a topic if we keep on doing activities with 2 periods. I might unable to finish up the syllabus.” – [ISNT9]

Consequently, the findings above are significant with preliminary findings on the implication of the using of student-centred approaches in Malaysian and Brunei Darussalam’s schools, which stated both novice and experienced teachers involved in the study still need a constant attention of applying student-centred learning in Islamic Education (Tengku Kasim et al., 2017). Shifting pedagogy in classroom practices by adopting a new approach was often seen as problematic and there will be challenges that come to hinder the utilization of student-centred learning approach (Aliusta & Özer, 2017). Pritchard (2014) claimed that there were lots of example on problems of relating students’ abilities to function effectively in class. In order to solve this, novice teachers should address multiple intelligence (Howard Gardner’s theory) in their lesson planning and teaching, therefore it can give a range of opportunities to students’ different intelligence strength (Pritchard, 2014).

Succouring Students with Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)

After the introduction of Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025), one of the Ministry’s desired students’ aspiration is students are being able to possess a thinking skill (MoE Malaysia, 2013). The bringing of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in the curriculum is to cater the young minds in preparing themselves with endless possibilities in the future, as well to fill in

jobs that are not yet created (Curran & Wetherbee, 2014). Therefore, teachers who are the person in charge are needed to accommodate students with ways to think in higher order (MoE Malaysia, 2014a).

“There should be an exposure for us on the techniques to teach the student how to think critically. Because there are also techniques on how the students answer the HOTS.” – [ISNT2]

“In order to implement HOTS, it depends on the teacher 100 percent.” – [ISNT3]

“Back in my previous school, HOTS has been implemented, but I do not know how to use it during my teaching. For instance, when I teach students to learn by using HOTS, I feel myself as my own student too. Because I have no idea on how to teach with HOTS. After I got transferred, then I was exposed to tips and techniques.” – [ISNT1]

Teachers’ understanding in planning the implementation of HOTS is important, as teachers need to master in ensuring the smoothness and effectiveness of the implementation of HOTS during their teaching and learning. Novice teachers’ need to plan a suitable teaching planning as a strategy for implementing HOTS. The study on the implementation of HOTS in Islamic Education at secondary schools in Putrajaya has found out that the level of Islamic Education teachers’ understanding on using HOTS in their teaching and learning is at a moderate level (Hj Nor et al., 2015).

Unlike ISNT4, she contended that HOTS are only applicable to students in top classes as they have an extensive knowledge, contrasting with the students that vice versa from them.

“In terms of applying HOTS, I will always ask my students who are in the top classes on HOTS questions. But for the back classes, I will apply the lowest level of thinking according to Bloom’s taxonomy. Because of the little knowledge that they have.” – [ISNT4]

Whilst Othman and Kassim's (2016) stand is opposite with ISNT4, due to the fact that the process of teaching and learning should be developed not merely based on abstract knowledge, but a practical knowledge that can be related with the current situation. This congruent with Al-Ghazali (1978), who asserted the role of the mind is to operate and grow by constant use and practice on how to think actively. A greater focus on helping students to practice HOTS rather than focusing on their lack of knowledge could provide more ability on applying domains that are highlighted by the Ministry, which is knowledge, skills, and values (MoE Malaysia, 2014b). In this case, ISNT10 was found to apply drilling technique in order to enhance her students thinking skills.

“There a few students that less proficient on how to construct sentences for higher order thinking skills questions, HOTS. That is why I always train them by using drilling technique. Always giving them questions so they can practice and apply it in their learning.” – ISNT10.

Former Deputy Minister of Education in Malaysia, Datuk P. Kamalanathan pointed out that teachers’ weakness is the cause of 60 percent of 282 primary and secondary schools that were assessed by the Ministry are having problems in implementing HOTS (Hasnan, 2017). This confirms there are several factors that need to be emphasized in training teachers so that they

can produce students who can master thinking skills. Another finding in Islamic Education teachers application of HOTS, they were not ready to apply it due to lack of exposure back in their teaching training programmes (Che Noh, Omar, & Hussin, 2014).

Facing students' undesired behaviours

The most unpleasant obstacle while developing novice teachers' teaching practices is to handle difficult students. No single factor that can determine on the causes of students behaviour undesirably in class, as such, it can be caused by boredom, students' socio-emotional problems or other contributing factors (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Macklem, 2015). During the data collection, a few of the novice teachers expressed their difficulties in handling their students.

“Their attitudes in learning is really hard. They do not even want to cooperate. It is quite difficult to make grouping activities.” [ISNT5]

“As for my students, they wanted the teacher him/herself to show them the way even though we already had prepared the materials for them. – If I give them a reference book to refer to, they will ask ‘which page was it? Can you show it? We are lazy.’” [ISNT7]

“During my first year, that is when I know the real students' behaviour. So we can foresee how the ‘journey’ will going to be, I mean, the students' background etc.” [ISNT3]

Yet, past researchers reported that novice teachers often solve problems related with instructional, classroom or any pedagogical problems individually without any support from any experienced teachers or experts (Tang, Chan, & Chanya, 2014). Perhaps, novice teachers are often associated to see classroom management in terms of rules and disciplines, which they assess from their students' attention span and exhibit acceptable behaviours in the classroom (Wolff, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2017). In contrast to the experienced teacher, they do not emphasize on the issue of classroom control. However, they are more concern on the root of the problems, how far the students' focus during teaching and learning, and how to improve the quality of their attention (Wolff et al., 2017). With the view differences, in order to fend off the notion of novice teachers trying new practices as a daunting task, they can seek an experienced teacher and work in tandem (Curran & Wetherbee, 2014).

The essential skill to curb students' uncontrollable behaviours is to be aware of students' differences and recognize the students. This coincides with student-centred learning, to form a meaningful conversation with students, so teachers can listen to their thoughts, ideas and questions (Curran & Wetherbee, 2014). These skills help in establishing a good relationship between teachers and students in the classroom, as well as facilitating the students' understanding because teachers have been using the method of teaching appropriate to adjust the student's diversity (Hussin et al., 2014). It can be implemented through courses in teacher training programme such as pedagogy and teaching methods, Educational Psychology, and Micro Teaching.

“Actually, we can manage to overcome difficult students. We cannot compare each one of them in class. We cannot cuss them because of their behaviours. So what I do, (I) just treat them equally with different approaches.” [ISNT9]

Ultimately, one of the effective ways to manage students in class is to divide them into small and manageable groups, and also attend them with materials that matched with students'

learning style (Faryadi, 2012). Teachers should give their students an autonomy in their learning; therefore, students can direct their individual needs, skills as well as their interests (Curran & Wetherbee, 2014).

Supportive Environments

The roots of an effective teaching and learning process come from a teacher's thorough planning that matching all the resources of knowledge with their students' capacity for learning. From novice teachers' perspective, despite the effort on solving any pedagogical problem, they tend to have less sophisticated strategies compared to experienced teachers. Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (2012) reported that novice teachers' self-efficacy is lower than experienced teachers even though they have a similar working conditions with experienced teacher. Hence, in relation to the stressful and demanding nature of teaching needed novice teachers to be able to voice out their difficulties with other experienced teachers can contribute to a better classroom environment.

“For example, if I am with a senior teacher, I will take the advantages to learn from her knowledge and experience. I asked her on how to control the student, what to do, and how to plan teaching strategies. She has helped me a lot.” – [ISNT10]

“If I have any difficulties with the syllabus, I will be more confident to convey it in class after I have asked from other experienced teachers' opinions.” – [ISNT7]

Fantilli and McDougall (2009) on their study investigating the challenges and supports that received by Canadian novice teaching during their first years, they found out that some of the novice teachers who received an informal support from their peers have less challenging classroom experiences.

Moreover, not only by seeking help from experienced teachers, some novice teachers also sought help or seeking for source of idea from other alternative medium. In United States of America, teachers can enter a dialogue with educators all around the world by following a hashtag from 'Twitter' such as #edchat (Curran & Wetherbee, 2014). They ventured out a way that is beyond normal, in which they can have the feedbacks from other educators after voicing out their problems. Likewise, in Malaysia, some Islamic education teachers use social media as a medium of sharing their knowledge and resources such as 'Facebook' or 'Telegram'.

“I joined a group at 'Telegram', so before I sleep, I will read teachers' sharing on what they did in their class. So I got an idea on what to do on my class.”

Due to the young minds revolving around technology and modern innovation, Islamic Education teachers need to keep up their instructional methods that are supposed to increase students' abilities. By forming appropriate engaging activities can capture students' attentions and help to extract their latent skills to meet the challenges in 21st century. Thus, as the result of receiving supports and feedbacks from their peers, it can benefit novice teachers to focus on improving the execution of their pedagogical based-knowledge as per needs of their students.

Conclusion

Due to the evolution of education paradigm that brings many advantages to accommodate young minds in preparing themselves to fill jobs that do not exist at this point, the need to produce an effective curriculum design that provides flexibility for our generation is very important. In Malaysia, lack of attention on the efforts to enhance teacher training programmes is incongruent with Malaysia Education Blueprint who wanted for a quality teacher standard.

The curriculum design should be revamped by not only adding new teaching experiences but to include new courses and formulate a brand-new alternative to help student-teachers teach and more competent in the latest pedagogical knowledge and ability to translate it to their practice.

The results from this study clearly highlighted few elements that are in the need for a room of improvements, especially in the field of Islamic Education. Pedagogical competencies amongst Islamic Education novice teachers should be emphasized by adding more exposure on the application of student-centred learning during the teacher training programme. Teacher personality, knowledge, pedagogy content knowledge, diversity of skills and the motivation in teaching and learning are the fundamental components that should be underlined as well in the Islamic Education teacher training programme (Tamuri, Ismail, & Jasmi, 2012). The exposure that can shape the generic skills should be integrated with either existing or separate courses. Moreover, scholars reported that generic skills need to be nurtured since the beginning of their academic year (Md Shah, Mukhtar, Abdullah, Abdul Malek, & Mohd Shukur, 2017). These generic skills amongst student-teachers can be strengthened by placing them at school-based practice or activity. Therefore, courses such as teaching practicum, microteaching and school orientation programme are crucial for them to gain additional knowledge through experiences.

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