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LEARNING AND SPIRITUALITY IN YOUNG MUSLIM CHILDREN

Abstract

This paper reports on one particular finding which emerged from a Singapore study of young Muslim children attending the last year of a four-year Islamic education weekend program. The program provides the 5-8 year old young learners with a learning environment in which they not only memorise Qur'anic verses but also learn the relevance of Islamic values and practices in their daily lives through activities which are age-appropriate. Learning in the program is perceived to be holistic in that it recognises the roles of thinking (cognitive), feeling (affective) and reflecting (spiritual) as complementary within the learning process. Children's account of what they have learnt suggests the emergence of interplay between these learning dimensions. Such interplay, as argued in this paper, may lead to transformative learning experiences even as the program itself is concerned with a particular outcome (i.e., convergence with the Islamic worldview).

Introduction

The study and transmission of religious knowledge have always been at the heart of Islamic tradition. Religious study is considered by many as a form of worship and Muslim children are taught Islamic education from a young age (Boyle, 2004; Hefner & Zaman, 2004). Education of Muslim children can take place through formal and semi-formal venues such as mosque schools, study circles, and after-school programs where the heritage of Islamic knowledge is passed to future generations. Education for Muslims may also take the form of the madrasah, a full-time educational institution where the curriculum includes both Islamic and secular education. The range of purposes of madrasahs can be as pragmatic as training students to become religious experts, to training students to become skilled tradespersons and employees of public and private secular institutions (Park & Niyozov, 2008). In Singapore, the majority of Muslim children receive their Islamic knowledge on a part-time basis in the mosques or private religious educational establishments. They attend the religious classes before or after school or during the weekends. A small majority choose to attend the full-time madrasahs where they receive both secular and religious education (Abu Bakar, 2009).

The history of Islamic education has been well documented elsewhere (Halstead, 2004; Hefner, 2009; Kadi, 2006; Park & Niyozov, 2008). It is replete with contributions to the development of Muslim and non-Muslim societies, the production of sacred and pragmatic knowledge which includes the science of hadith (the recorded and verified words and actions of Prophet Muhammad), mathematics and medicine through the combination of spiritual and secular knowledge, and the schooling of famous religious and worldly scholars and artists. The days of Muslim learning and scholarship, however, did not last due to internal and external reasons, the political rivalries among Muslim leaders and the Western colonial expansion being notable among them. Today, Islamic schools, particularly in Southeast Asia, have generally abandoned the pursuit of rational sciences and focused exclusively on the teachings of Islam as prescribed in the Qur'an (Haqqani, 2002; Rahman, 1982). The madrasahs have thus evolved from the centres of Islamic learning to the centres of secular knowledge acquisition, to the current state of greater emphasis on Islamic teachings only, and with it the pedagogical emphasis on memorisation and recitation.

For some time, Singapore has shared with other Muslim countries in the region, an Islamic education which is perceived to suffer from shortcomings. These include the over emphasis on the cognitive skills of memorisation and rote learning, and the attention to rituals and aspects of mysticism. Such emphases appear

to depart from ideas on education in contemporary society which emphasises the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, the cultivation of a spirit of inquiry, the development of responsible attitudes and the preparation of young people for later life and wider society (Abdul Rahman, 2006).

The rapid globalisation and Islamic revivalism in the last two decades provided the impetus for the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore to review the Islamic education in the mosques and in selected madrasahs. A new curriculum for the mosques, known as aL.I.V.E. (Learning Islamic Values Everyday), was introduced in 2004 as a result. Two pilot programmes were initially launched – Kids aL.I.V.E. (children aged from 5-8 years old) and Teens aL.I.V.E. (for 13-16 year olds) – followed by two more programs in 2006 – Tweens (for 9-12 year olds) and Youth aL.I.V.E. (for 17-24 year olds). Offered part time, these mosque-based programs exist alongside the existing curriculum which is to be gradually replaced by the aL.I.V.E. program.

The curriculum and philosophy of the aL.I.V.E. programs suggest that they are a better alternative to the existing approach of teaching Islam to the young. Through age-appropriate activities, the students engage in less memorisation and recitation but they learn about the relevance of Islamic values and practices in their daily lives and their identity as Muslims in relation to the world and people around them. The aim is to prepare Muslims of different age groups to better understand, appreciate and practise Islam in light of the present and future challenges. It develops students "intellectually, spiritually and emotionally…into a responsible social being" (Youth Education Strategic Unit, 2007). The question addressed by the present study is how might students of this program embody this cherished aim. de Souza's (2004) three dimensions of learning – cognitive, affective and spiritual – provide a useful framework to investigate this question.

In de Souza's work with pre-service teachers, she asks them to write cognitive, affective and spiritual learning outcomes. Any content that the teachers want to teach must be taught in such a way that the child has the opportunity to think, feel and intuit/ imagine/ create. This latter process requires time built in to the learning process and it means that the learning moves deeper into the non-conscious mind and re-emerges in the form of an intuition/ creation/ solution to a problem. The roles of thinking (cognitive), feeling (affective) and reflecting or intuiting (spiritual) are recognised as complementary within the learning process. The outcomes of such learning are not limited to the acquisition of the complex cognitive skills desired such that learners may produce 'right' answers but goes beyond the surface and may include a transformative experience for the learners. The complementarity of the three dimensions in the learning process has been supported by contemporary scholarship (Buchanan & Hyde, 2008; de Souza, 2005; Hyde, 2010; Palmer, 1998).

This paper focuses on the aL.I.V.E. program designed for 5-8 year olds called Kids aL.I.V.E. It examines students' account of what they have learnt in the program. While de Souza uses the learning dimensions in planning a teaching strategy, this paper uses these dimensions as a framework to analyse what has been learnt. It starts with the following question: How do the students' accounts of what they have learnt in the Kids aL.I.V.E. program demonstrate the complementarity of the cognitive, affective and spiritual dimensions of their learning?

The following section outlines briefly de Souza's three dimensions of learning as adapted for use in the present study.

Cognitive, Affective and Spiritual Dimensions of Learning

Learning experiences which have the power to be transformative – when learning goes beyond the surface and touches the soul of the student leading the individual to act upon what has been learned – require a holistic pedagogical approach to education (de Souza, 2004). Effective learning takes place when the cognitive, affective and spiritual dimensions function in complementary roles (de Souza, 2005).

Cognitive

The cognitive dimension of learning is concerned with the acquisition of declarative and functional knowledge, as well as the acquisition of skills and abilities. In the context of Islamic education, a distinctive emphasis on the cognitive dimension of learning is the knowing of the content of Islamic teaching on faith and morals. For example, a student might be able to:

> *Recite and explain what Surah 'Al Humazah' (Chapter on 'The Slanderer') of the Qur'an is about.*

Affective

The affective dimension of learning on the other hand is concerned with the reactions, feelings and emotions of the learner. The affective domain is the types of human reaction or response to the content, subject matter, problems, or areas of human experience – the area of human character which deals with emotions, feelings, attitudes, values, predispositions and morals. For example, a student might seize the opportunity to:

> *Appreciate what type of people are scandal-mongers.*

Spiritual

The spiritual has come to be understood in terms of the connectedness, or relationship an individual has with self, others, the world, and with the Transcendent, named in the Muslim tradition as Allah. While the affective dimension concerns the reaction, feelings and emotions, the spiritual domain offers an occasion to reflect inwardly so as to express outwardly aspects of the inner transformation that may have taken place. Spirituality can be seen as relational, which is demonstrated through the individuals' expressions of connectedness to the human and non-human world. For example, a student might be moved to:

> *Reflect inwardly on the message of (for example) the story of scandal-mongers to consider how it may challenge their perception of friends.*

Learning that encompasses the affective and spiritual dimensions, together with the cognitive, may result in a transformative experience, potentially providing the learners with a more lasting impact. The harnessing of these three dimensions in students' learning supports a key focus of the Singapore Islamic Education System which has a distinctive emphasis in developing a curriculum that is relevant, dynamic and full of significant learning experiences for Muslims in Singapore.

Background of Singapore

Singapore is a city-state of four million people in the middle of the Malay Archipelago. On independence, it inherited from the British colonial government a population of mixed racial background the composition of which remains roughly the same till today – Chinese (78%), Malays (14%), Indians (7%), and other races (1%) (Leow, 2001). The Malays are native to the area and almost all of them profess Islam as their religion. They form the biggest group of Muslims in Singapore followed by Singaporeans of Arab and Indian descent with the Chinese and Eurasian converts forming the smallest Muslim group. Taoists, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and believers of other faiths make up the rest of the population.

Malay is the national language and one of four official languages that comprise also English, Chinese and Tamil. Following the British colonial administration and education, English is the language of administration, widely used in the professions and businesses, and the primary language of the school. Alongside the official languages is Singlish, an English-based creole spoken colloquially in Singapore. Chinese, Malay and Tamil are learned as mother tongue languages in school, a policy to safeguard Singaporeans' sense of identity with the cultures that their mother tongues represent. For the Malays until recently, the Malay language has been the sole language through which they learn about Islam.

Singapore is constitutionally a secular state and does not allow religion to play a significant role in the national curriculum. But the constitution upholds the right of groups to adhere to their religious faiths and grant them space to engage in their practices. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore has been entrusted with the responsibility of offering a full-time Islamic education within its religious schools (*madrasah*) as well as part-time options. Until 2000, little was modified in the traditional way of teaching Islam to young generations. In 2004, after a review of the mosque madrasah program, the aL.I.V.E. program mentioned earlier was introduced as a holistic system of Islamic education with a view to eventually replacing the existing mosque madrasah program. The change in curriculum and pedagogy extends to the medium of instruction, from Malay to English, to cater to the many Malay children who are increasingly more comfortable using English (and Singlish) and also to accommodate non-Malay-speaking students in the program.

Method

Participants

Three mosques which offered the Kids aL.I.V.E. program and which had run the full length of the four-year program were identified. The participants were accessed through an Islamic Religious Council officer who liaised with the supervisor of the program in the mosques who then made enquiries with families of children in the final year of the program. The families were invited to participate in what was officially called 'a survey'. A total of 20 children (15 Malays and 5 Indians, aged 8 years old) were selected on an indiscriminate basis from among those whose parents had given permission for their participation. All the children were enrolled in the program since Year 1 (while at the age of 5 years old) and would have had a full exposure to the program by the time they took part in the research.

Data Collection

Following a pilot study, data from the 20 participants described above were collected over a period of four months. For each of the 20 children, one visit was made to the home lasting about two hours. The parents understood the visit as a means of gathering feedback from them and their children about the program. This has implications on the findings as will be discussed later. Also, the fact that the author was an outsider might not have provided for a 'safe' environment for the children to explore other than what they thought the researcher was looking for.

The author and a Research Assistant (RA) carried out face-to-face interviews with the focal child and parent participants, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. The author interviewed the parent(s) in attendance while the RA spent time with their child chatting with him/her on some relevant topics. The language medium was English or Malay, according to the preference of the participants.

The data which this paper draws on was based on the interviews with the children on the following two areas:

a) Around three main topics: 1) Stories of the prophets; 2) *Surahs* (chapters) from the Qur'an; 3) Pillars of Islam (duties incumbent on every Muslim, i.e., the five daily prayers (*solat*), almsgiving, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and a pilgrimage to Mecca). Questions include: "What have I just learnt?", "How am I feeling right now?" The inquiry aimed at discovering what the child professed to have learned and how he/she felt about his/her own learning, which was part of the inner reflection.

b) Around pictures. The pictures were introduced to the child with an open-ended "I wonder …" question such as "I wonder how this picture makes you feel/think about?" The aim was to generate some reflective conversation on the topic (Hay & Nye, 2006).

Data Analysis

All the interviews were electronically recorded, and all were transcribed by Malay-English bilingual transcribers. The utterances were coded and examples selected for inclusion in the study. From the close examination of the transcript, the author analysed for evidence of cognitive, affective and spiritual dimensions of learning.

Findings

The interview data suggested there was an emergence of the interplay between the cognitive, affective and spiritual dimensions of what the children had learnt, although this varied between students. The cognitive dimension was particularly evident in the students' narratives. For instance, many knew the stories about the prophets, the moral behind it, and they remembered the activities they did in class in relation to these stories. However, some had difficulty re-telling these stories, missing out details, while others had difficulty naming the prophets even though they knew the story accurately. A contributing factor could be that they had learnt about a new prophet almost every week and, over time, they found it difficult to keep track. Similarly, students' had learnt about the five pillars of Islam. Some knew the details appropriate to their age – for instance, in the case of fasting, one cannot eat or drink during the day – but some needed prompting before they could respond appropriately.

The affective dimension was also apparent in the students' narratives although the girls showed a greater propensity to express their feelings than the boys. In relation to the story of Prophet Noah, one girl expressed her sadness when the Prophet was not believed by his own people, and anger when he was branded as a mad person. A boy expressed his feelings in a rather sophisticated way such as desiring for those who opposed Prophet Muhammad to suffer the same 'pain' as what the Prophet had endured. Another boy was rather worried that his act of kindness might not have counted because the money he had given to a roadside beggar was not his own but his aunt's. One girl felt happy that she could fast during the month of Ramadan but for reasons of her own, i.e., she could save her pocket money.

The spiritual is the more difficult dimension to track in the children's narratives. For instance, when a child expresses his/her willingness to help others in need or when the child says that doing *solat* (the five daily obligatory prayers) can get one to heaven, it is not clear if these potentially spiritual awakening activities have become part of the child's natural self or simply a regurgitation of what the teacher has enjoined upon him/ her to do. It is also difficult to determine if a child's inclination to engage in acts that earn him/her rewards to heaven is a spiritual act or a material consideration, or at best a cognitive activity.

Space does not permit the author to present each of the various texts of the research. However, those outlined below suggest the emergence of the interplay between the cognitive, affective and spiritual dimensions of what the children had learnt. The first two excerpts are taken from the interactions between the children and the RA around the stories of the prophets and the pillars of Islam. The last excerpt is an example of the children's response to the pictures/drawings presented to them.

In the first excerpt below, a male student, Zul, was quizzed about what he knew about the third pillar of Islam, i.e., fasting during the month of Ramadan, and in this particular exchange, the cognitive, affective and spiritual aspects are quite evident.

Excerpt 1

Fasting during the month of Ramadan

RA:	Imagine you have a friend in school, let's say this friend … is not a Muslim, then this person goes up to you and says, "Zul, can you tell me what is fasting?" So you imagine this person doesn't know a single thing about fasting right, so what do you say to this person?	
Zul:	Fasting is we cannot eat and drink. When it's our pray time, we can break our fast and eat.	
RA:	And then if the friend says, "But why must you fast?"	*5*
Zul:	We must fast because we must feel how the poor people don't have food.	
RA:	Oh, okay. So by fasting, we know how the poor people feel?	
Zul:	Yeah.	
RA:	And what exactly do they feel?	
Zul:	Hunger.	*10*
RA:	How do you feel for them?	
Zul:	No, should not feel hungry.	
	……………….	
RA:	So after you break your fast, how do you feel?	
Zul:	I feel so happy, excited.	*15*
RA:	Why?	
Zul:	Because can eat.	
	……………….	
RA:	So now that it's over right, how do you feel, when you look back, oh, I fast thirty days, how do you feel?	*20*
Zul:	I feel so excited, happy.	
RA:	Why?	
Zul:	Because finally I finish my fasting, I hope I get so many *pahalas* (reward) from Allah.	

At the cognitive level, Zul demonstrated certain knowledge about fasting, that one cannot eat or drink during the period of a day and the reason for it (lines 4-6). The affective dimension involved his reactions and feelings, both about the realisation on people who fast ('hunger', line 10) and his own experience at the conclusion of the fast ('excited' and 'happy', line 21). The spiritual dimension was inherent at two levels: one was his inner reflection that one 'should not feel hungry' (line 12), almost suggesting some kind of appropriate response. The other level was his desire that his act of fasting earned him points to heaven (lines 23) which displayed the primary reason for why he fasted, i.e., submitting to God's injunction. If in fact these reflections would lead him to want to help the poor, this would have meant a transformative learning experience, potentially providing him with a lasting impact. Thus, in this episode, Zul demonstrated a disposition that located himself within two forms of relationship, between him and God and between him and his fellow man.

In the second excerpt, a female student, Siti, was asked about doing good deeds.

Excerpt 2

Doing a Good Deed

RA:	I believe the surah talks about good deed as well, right?	
Siti:	Yeah…	
RA:	What can you tell me about good deeds?	
Siti:	The one who has a… the heaviest… the good deed that is the heaviest the one, he will go to the… he will go to heaven, *Jannah*… the… and the one who has less good deeds, will go to a pit of hell… there is fire… hot.	*5*
RA:	What can you do that's a good deed?	
Siti:	… helping *lah*.	
RA:	Ok. Helping others? Do you think it's important to help other people?	
Siti:	Yeah because, example, you fall down the staircase and your leg is bleeding, … and then a kid walks pass you and they said 'haiya, no need to help you *lah*', of course you can walk by yourself, and then they walk pass us without… without caring about us, being bossy… and we were like asking for help, and then when the next time they fall down we said… then we will help them because (even though) last time they did not help us what, so we just cannot leave them, lying there, leg bleeding… we want to be very good… I help… I will help them... try not to be very bossy, and try not to… like feel angry because they did not help me when I fell down... so just be helpful and… forget about the thing happened… forget about the thing that had happened, just forget it and just… remember about now, don't… don't remember about the last time.	*10* *15*
RA:	Why do you want to help them when they didn't help you?	
Siti:	Because we all want to go to heaven, and we don't want to go to hell…	*20*
RA:	How do we get to heaven?	
Siti:	We have to do good deeds, and we worship… we worship Allah but not the idols, and we always help our friends, try not to be angry when they didn't help us.	

Again, the cognitive, affective and spiritual aspects can be identified in this exchange. At the cognitive level, Siti was not able to give a direct answer about what a good deed is, preferring to highlight the 'utility' of doing good deeds (the chance to go to heaven, lines 4-6). When pressed further, she still did not answer to the question but gave an example of what a good deed is ('helping', line 8). As far as her affective response is concerned, she did not offer an adjective to describe her feelings, but traces of disappointment and anger can be detected in her hypothetical account of her falling on the stairs and not being helped by a passer-by (lines 10-13). Her hypothetical reverse situation where it was the passer-by who suffered the calamity and not herself (lines 13-18) included a declaration that she would still help him despite the latter not helping her when she fell. In this, the spiritual dimension was also evident; her inner reflection allowed her to keep her anger in check to do what was right. This was made clearer in the last turn where she reiterated what she meant by a good deed (lines 22-23). As with Zul, Siti also showed awareness of her relationship with God and the human person.

In the third excerpt, a male student, Salim, was responding to the 'I wonder' type of questions as he looked at a picture.

Excerpt 3

Looking at a picture of a beach

RA:	*Bila Salim tengok gambar ini* [When you look at this picture], what does this picture remind you of?	
Salim:	Keep the place clean.	
RA:	Why do you say that?	
Salim:	So that when people swim, the sea will be clean.	*5*
RA:	Is it important to keep the environment clean?	
Salim:	Yes.	
RA:	Why?	
Salim:	If not [there'll be] mosquitoes..	
RA:	Oh, ok. [pause] What else will happen if the water is not clean?	*10*
Salim:	People cannot swim.	
RA:	Ya. I wonder what this boy [pointing to a boy in the picture] will feel if he finds the water dirty.	
Salim:	I don't know.	
RA:	What would you feel?	
Salim:	Sad.	*15*
RA:	And what would you feel if the water is clean?	
Salim:	Ok.	
RA:	Ya?	
Salim:	When we go to the beach, we can use the water to take wudu' (ablution).	
RA:	Oh, you learned that from your teacher?	*20*
Salim:	Yes.	

Here, the spiritual dimension of Salim is apparent throughout this exchange particularly in the beginning where he showed concerned for his fellow human – people might not want to swim in dirty water (lines 5 & 11) and that it could breed mosquitoes which is also harmful to human beings (line 9). Although his cognitive understanding of mosquito breeding is open to challenge – stagnant water is more likely to invite mosquito breeding than dirty, moving water – he at least had the right idea that a beach should be kept clean so that it could be enjoyed by all. Towards the end of the excerpt (lines 19), Salim offered an additional reason for keeping the beach clean – one can use clean sea water to take one's ablution and perform one's prayer. Here, his cognitive ability to tap the relevance of what he had learnt is clear to see. Lastly, the affective dimension is evident through the adjectives he used to describe his feeling if he had found the water dirty or clean – 'sad' (line 15) and 'OK' (line 17) respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is worth noting the complexity and difficulty in making judgements about the children's achievement on the affective and spiritual dimensions. Awareness of the learning at these two dimensions may not actually be demonstrated within the timeframe of a particular lesson but rise to the surface and be displayed in another time – weeks, or months, or even years – after the initial learning takes place. Thus, a person could learn something at 8 years of age but might not make sense of it in the affective or spiritual domains until much later in life (Buchanan & Hyde, 2008). Despite this, the affective and spiritual learning reported above which is indicative of the children's learning at the time of the study is quite revealing. Transformative learning is a real possibility within the Kids aL.I.V.E. program although the extent this applies broadly beyond the 20 children in the sample is worthy of further study.

In the first two excerpts, the minds, hearts and souls of the children came to the fore as they related their understanding of the topics they had learnt in the program. What is interesting is that the students, in displaying their understanding and spirituality, were drawing mostly on the Islamic tradition, considered to be the received and authoritative wisdom. The student in the second excerpt did add personal meaning by thinking imaginatively about problems that mattered to her and affixing her own 'personal signature' to her understanding (Hay & Nye, 2006), but it may be argued that she was still operating within the Islamic worldview. In a world where children are exposed to a range of alternative social and cultural frameworks of meaning, e.g., the media, popular culture and the children's own peer group, it is remarkable that these students drew little upon these other sources and in fact were already converging on the Islamic framework at a very young age. This presents quite a different cultural context to other studies that were conducted in the western culture where children seemed to draw more openly on a more eclectic range of frameworks that enabled them to engage in their 'natural wonderings' in order to create meaning for themselves (Coles, 1990; Hyde, 2008a).

Perhaps it should not be too surprising that the findings suggest the existence of a convergence of worldviews lodged in Islam. That Islam seems to feature in the students' responses and thoughts may have been induced by the interview itself. The questions raised and the purpose of the interview may have invoked a religious response or conditioned them to relate to what they have learnt and understood on Islamic teachings and rituals. The response of the student in the third excerpt might provide another insight into the children's spirituality. Here, he showed a glimpse of his capacity to use a seemingly different framework of meaning other than Islamic – environmental consideration. But he also laced his response with the application of a religious practice – that clean water can be used to take ablution. It may be argued, however, that the two frameworks of meaning may not be totally unrelated. The need for a Muslim to be aware of his/her responsibility to both God and the world around is a quality enjoined in Islam (Renard, 1996) and is congruent with the aims of the aL.I.V.E. program.

Scholars have noted that socialisation (some call it indoctrination) into a particular adult form of spiritual awareness rather than attentiveness to the spiritual experiences of children does occur within religious disciplines (Yust, Johnson, Sasso, & Roehlkepartain, 2006). In the context of this study, the socialisation could have occurred earlier in the program, or even at home where the cultural upbringing must have been a critical factor (Marks, 2004; Yildirim, 2006). If indeed this was the case, the children might not have felt constricted by the research setting but rather, the significance of the Islamic framework which they were culturally socialised into from an early age may have put a lid on any inclination they had to draw upon other sources to create personal meaning.

The above discussion suggests that the role of an Islamic education program such as Kids aL.I.V.E. is one of strengthening the already emerging convergence rather than acting as a counter-cultural exercise implied by some scholars in the case of western Christian education (de Souza, 2006, cited in Hyde, 2008b). The tension inherent in such a context between, on the one hand, a religious frame in which learning involves coming to see the 'truth' of the received and authoritative wisdom of the religious tradition, and on the other, the children's ontological predisposition to create their own meaning derived from the many other frameworks available to them (Erricker, 2001; Hyde, 2008b), does not surface in the case of the Kids aL.I.V.E. program. Clearly, further research in this area is required in order to obtain a more definitive picture of the nature of Muslim children's spirituality and its development. In relation to the present study, one might perhaps find answers in the children's initial years in the Kids aL.I.V.E program, or at home, the site where children's convergence towards the Islamic framework may find its roots and where the counter-cultural exercise may be actively enacted by the parents.

Acknowledgement

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