Building Student Character through Contextual Learning Approach: Islamic Education Novice Teachers' Experiences

Membina Perwatakan Pelajar Menerusi Pembelajaran Kontekstual: Pengalaman Guru Novis Pendidikan Islam

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how contextual learning approach influences the character development of Malaysian students. It reflects on how contextual learning activities applied by Islamic Education novice teachers can build student character and personality. This is a qualitative research underpinned by a constructivist learning theory as theoretical and analytical framework. A total of 10 Islamic Education novice teachers participated in this study. Data were collected through semi -structured individual interviews and classroom observations. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyse and present the research findings. The findings offer some significant insights into how contextual learning activities applied by the participants have directly and indirectly developed student character, values, personality and behaviour. The findings of this study reveal that contextual learning contributes to the building of student character. The findings of the study also provide educators, especially novice teachers, better understanding of excellent skills, such as contextual learning, more effectively. These skills are critical in order to be able to produce a competitive new generation in the face of life demands, in line with rapid development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Contextual learning when incorporated into learning will expose teachers to authentic experiences in the classroom, playing their role in developing student personality and character, together with academic performance.

Keywords: Building of student character; contextual learning approach; constructivist learning theory; student-centred learning; qualitative case study

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana pendekatan pembelajaran kontekstual mempengaruhi perkembangan perwatakan pelajar di Malaysia. Kajian memperlihatkan bagaimana aktiviti pembelajaran kontekstual yang diaplikasi oleh guru novis Pendidikan Islam dapat membina perwatakan dan keperibadian pelajar. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk penyelidikan kualitatif dan disokong oleh teori pembelajaran konstruktivis sebagai kerangka teori dan analisis. Seramai 10 orang guru novis Pendidikan Islam telah mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Data telah dikumpul melalui temu ramah separa berstruktur secara individu dan pemerhatian dalam bilik darjah. Analisis tematik telah digunakan untuk menganalisis dan mempersembahkan hasil kajian. Dapatan kajian menawarkan beberapa pandangan yang signifikan mengenai bagaimana aktiviti pembelajaran kontekstual yang diaplikasikan oleh para peserta kajian secara langsung dan tidak langsung dapat membina perwatakan, nilai, keperibadian dan tingkah laku pelajar. Hasil dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa pembelajaran kontekstual menyumbang kepada pembinaan perwatakan pelajar. Hasil kajian juga menyediakan pendidik, terutama guru novis, dengan pemahaman yang lebih baik dan kemahiran yang lebih berkesan berkaitan dengan pembelajaran kontekstual. Ini adalah penting supaya dapat menyediakan generasi baharu yang berdaya saing dalam menghadapi kehidupan, seiring dengan perkembangan pesat Teknologi Maklumat dan Komunikasi (ICT). Penerapan pembelajaran kontekstual dalam proses pembelajaran akan mendedahkan para guru dengan pengalaman yang sebenar dalam memainkan peranan mereka di dalam kelas untuk mengembangkan keperibadian, perwatakan dan prestasi intelektual.

Kata kunci: Pembinaan perwatakan pelajar; pendekatan pembelajaran kontekstual; teori pembelajaran konstruktivis; pembelajaran pemusatan pelajar; kajian kes kualitatif

INTRODUCTION

The issue of societal character has become a public spotlight. Emerging problems in society such as corruption, violence, sex crimes, vandalism, fight mass and so become a topic of hot discussion on variety occasions. Various alternative solutions to the issue of the social character have been proposed such as regulation, legislation, as well as the increased measures to strengthen the implementation and application of the social ruling. Another alternative that is often raised to overcome the problem of social character is education. Throughout history, education has had two primary goals, i.e.; to educate people intellectually and to teach them to be morally good. Thus, good education is education that does not merely prepare students for a job, profession or position, but also to install strong character to encounter the challenges and problems faced in daily life.

From Islamic perspective, the fundamental objective of education is the balanced and integrated growth of individuals. Education in Islam represents an approach that aims to achieve a perfect and balanced human being. The training of a person as a whole being should necessarily be aimed at his spiritual, intellectual, rational and physical aspects, as being human is made up of a dual nature of spirit and body (Hashim 1999). Spirituality constitutes a fundamental and pervasive aspect of human functioning called morality or moral values. According to Juhasz, Marken and Ruiz (1998), morality is the negotiation of judgments about what is good and bad, right and wrong particularly when these judgments are made in social settings. Morality not only refers to the fundamental goals and values, lifestyles, and identity of an individual, but also entails the interpersonal aspects of life, which regulates one's interactions, orders of relationships, and conflict solving methods (Walker 2004). In light of this perspective, morality can be perceived as intertwined with spiritual and religious values, where each of these aspects can influence each other (Tengku Kasim & Md Yusoff 2014). In other words, from an Islamic perspective, the integration of the material and the spiritual-moral life brings about an internal harmony that is the source of mental health and emotional stability. This dual consciousness regulates a Muslim individual's psychological and physical needs as well as his or her overall personal and social conduct (Tengku Kasim & Md Yusoff 2014).

Character education is not new; it is as old as education itself. Character education was central to education in general. The terms of characters linked and interchangeable with the term ethics, the moral, value and deals with moral strength. Likewise, character education was at the heart of teacher education programs. Character education is the reform of education through curriculum changes. Teachers' practices and decisions are embedded inextricably in classroom life for the students to model and thus develop sound character. Education does not only encourage students to develop talents that are tailored to the knowledge acquired at school, but also aims to promote the quality of human beings who are faithful and fearful of God, noble, independent, responsible, professional, productive, and physically and mentally healthy. The purpose of education in Islam is to develop the whole person in a way that all knowledge acquired by him will become organic to his total personality (Ashraf 1985). The al-Qur'an emphasizes on the importance of producing a well-balanced person and developing his soul to worship Allah SWT (Siddig Ahmad 2019). Thus, the main purpose of education in Islam is to provide guidance to individuals in order to assist them to grow into good people. Halstead (2004) suggests that the key aim of education is to guide, as people are not able to gain their ability and potential automatically. This has been supported by Yaakub (2009) who argues that through education, individuals achieve self-confidence and self-dependence, and also become strong physically and mentally.

In Malaysia, the act of transforming education can be seen through several educational efforts taken by the government in order to revamp the Malaysian higher education system by embracing 'Teaching and Learning 4.0'. The revamp is vital as it has the responsibility in developing student-teachers dynamics that can deal with 21st century education in requiring complex thinking without neglecting the good values. The 21st century integration and development in education resulted in a huge shift in Malaysia's education system, by the introduction of Secondary School Standard Curriculum or in Malay, *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah* (KSSM) in 2017 and Primary School Standard Curriculum or *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) which was implemented in 2011 to replace the old curriculum that was too focusing on the content of the subjects. KSSM suggests that teaching and learning strategies should be learner-centred, collaborative,

fun and emphasising the development of characters, personalities, thinking skills and soft skills. The main goal of both curriculums is to produce a well-balanced individual student in terms of knowledge and skills, also has strong has a strong moral and ethical values. Contextual learning and student-centred learning approaches are expected to form the development of students' characters, potentials, balanced and integrated development, which includes intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically to produce a balanced, harmonious and noble individual.

Islamic education emphasizes on the process of shaping characters within the Islamic worldview (Abdul Kabir 2016). Therefore, Islamic education teachers as a part of the school organization have a dominant role in shaping the character and behaviour of students. It is importance to ensure effective mentoring is incorporated in the character development so that the process of producing new talents can be implemented accordingly (Mohd Mursyid Arshad et al. 2021). The teaching of Islamic topics which values sources from al-Quran and Sunnah through the application of contextual learning approach, can touch the faith dimension of the students and produce the behaviour concern towards better attitude.

NOVICE TEACHERS' ROLE IN BUILDING STUDENTS' CHARACTERS

Different countries have their own justification in classifying novice teachers' years of teaching (Tengku Kasim & Abdurajak 2016). Tang, Kanokorn and Prachak (2014) in their study, provided a differentiation in years by each selected country (See table 1). They asserted that in Malaysia, novice teachers are required to attend and complete the induction course provided by the Ministry of Education. After going through officials' bureaucracies (certified by head of department and passed security clearance), their statuses will later be confirmed by Educational Services Commission.

TABLE 1. Novice Teachers' Years of Teaching

Country	Years of Teaching	Justification
New Zealand	2 years	Introduced as new qualified teachers
Singapore	2 years	National of Education provided two years of coaching
Japan	Nil	Will be chosen as 'expert teachers' if they have at least 10 years of teaching experience
Australia	Less than 3 years	Based on Australian Primary Principal Reports
Malaysia	1 to 3 years	After they successfully attended and completed induction course

On the contrary, Fantilli and McDougall (2009) and Ibrahim (2012) claimed that a novice teacher is a teacher that has less than five years teaching experience. However, a handful of teaching years is not an indicator for the novice teachers to build up their competencies in the teaching profession. According to Farrell (2008), there are numbers of factors that can influence novice teachers' competency development besides their initial experiences. Such examples are their socialisation process during the first year, previous schooling encounters and teacher training programme.

In light of emphasizing 21st century education, novice teachers are expected to be equipped and conducted the teaching and learning process efficiently efficaciously as a new educator. As recent graduates from teacher training programs, their pedagogical theory-based knowledge that they have obtained is imperative in helping them address current education affairs.

Theoretically, all novice teachers have been exposed with the understanding on teaching and learning during their teaching training. By putting pedagogical practices into focus of the study, it revolves around the appearance of the 21st century education, a technology-friendly that has embodied in the education framework, which comes along with various methods, techniques, strategies, and tools to meet the latest needs. It is also requiring a novice teacher to emphasize student as the heart of the learning, and the students can independently construct their knowledge with their current experiences under the guidance of their teachers.

In line with current education pace, Islamic Education novice teachers are expected to switch their role from conventional technique into student-centred approach as it will automatically trigger their creativity to create better strategies in teaching, such as through the application of contextual learning approach, as a method to build student's character. In

accordance with the twenty-first century education, the novice teachers were envisaged to conduct their teaching and learning process into student-centred learning strategies such as group work, gallery walk, parking lot, discussion etc. Student-activating teaching is "an approach that stimulates students to construct knowledge by means of real life, realistic, practical and relevant assignments that requiring students' active involvement to incorporate available information" (Struyven, Doch & Janssens 2010).

Moreover, the analyses of literature indicate that student-centred methods of teaching were adopted in Islamic education tradition including contextual learning, observation and experimentation, reason and reflection; problem solving, dialogue, discussion, application, independent learning, and project-based learning (Abdullah 1994; Abdullah 1995; Ghazali 2001; Hisham 1989; Mansoor 1983; Nasr 1978). These methods have been used by several Islamic scholars such as Al Biruni, Imam Abu Hanifah, Imam Malik, Abu Hasan al-Basri, and Wasil Ibn 'Ata' as teaching tools for their students (Abdullah 1994; Abdullah 1995; Ghazali 2001; Hisham 1989; Mansoor 1983; Nasr 1978).

This is not surprising as the Islamic philosophy of education emphasizes that learners should be active in their learning. Al-Ghazali (1997) recognized that, according to Islam, knowledge has two expressions: 1) theory (knowing or '*Ilm);* and 2) practice (doing or '*amal*). These two dimensions are inseparable. Al-Ghazali (1978) claimed that "nobody can be learned unless he puts his learning into practice" (p. 71). He believed that "doing or '*amal*" includes not only those manifestations of the five senses, but the practices of the heart as well. He emphasized that learning something without putting it into practice invalidates what has been learned.

Therefore, Islamic Education teachers are responsible to build directly and indirectly students' character, value, personality and behaviour. Teachers are the main agents in the formation of good characters among students other than their parents (Mohamed et al. 2016). Islamic character values refer to *akhlaq mahmudah* such as honesty, humbleness, patience, respectfulness, resilience and sincerity. Meanwhile, the bad character or *akhlaq madzmumah* such as untruthfulness, arrogance, anger, disrespectfulness, desperateness, *riya, ujub, sum'ah* and other bad characters (Tamuri 2007). Good character is also based on how to maintain a relationship with Allah, the One, *habluminnallah*, and with another human, *habluminnas*. Those noble *akhlaq* or noble characters are according to Al Qur'an and As-Sunnah (Prophet Muhammad's teachings). These values should be inculcated by Islamic Education teachers, formally through teaching and learning process or indirectly through students' activities and programs. They are expected to implement the approach as a medium for academic and character excellence among students. Thus, the objectives of this study therefore, are to examine how Islamic Education novice teachers implement contextual learning approaches in the classroom and how the application of contextual learning approaches affect the development of students' character.

CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING

Contextual approach is the cornerstone philosophy of constructivism. Thus, this study is underpinned by the constructivist learning theories. Constructivist learning theories are based on Lev Vygotsky's theory. The theory proposed that learning is not just an individual matter, but that it develops within a social environment (Vygotsky 1978). The theory emphasizes the importance of student learning through interaction with other learners (Jadallah 2000; Maypole & Davies 2001). According to the theories, learning does not take place on its own but begins when people come together to contribute concepts, ideas, facts, skills, and attitudes (O'Neill & McMahon 2005).

Vygotsky's (1978) theory requires social interaction and dialogue in that "the understandings and capabilities that emerge from social interaction with a group are greater than those that are possible at an intrapersonal level" (Light 2008: 25). The most significant constructivist tool is language. The theory, therefore, acknowledges the role of language in mediating learning, in particular the processes of human dialogue, interaction, negotiation, and collaboration (Duffy & Cunningham 1996). As Prawat and Floden (1994) argue that through the use of language and other artefacts, society shapes the individual's view of reality. In other words, through language, members of a community learn to adapt the world in similar ways.

The development of language, articulation of ideas and culture are central to learning and development (Vygotsky 1978). Humans are the only species to have created culture and every child develops in the context of a culture. Therefore, a person's learning development is affected to either a small or large extent by culture and family

environment. Vygotsky focuses on the notion that humans use tools and sign systems in order to transfer themselves to reshape cultural forms of society (Woolfolk 2001).

Constructivism emphasizes the construction of knowledge based on the interaction of existing knowledge and new knowledge through experience (Von Glasserfeld 1995). According to Vygotsky (1978), students construct their own knowledge through their own experience and the through learning process which students required the assistance from their peers and adults in the form of scaffolding. The theory suggests that learning through constructivism will improve students' critical thinking skills and problem solving. In addition, they will also able to use scientific understanding to solve various problems, and continuously will absorb and cultivate the information obtained.

STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in student-centred learning paradigms. Student-centred paradigms are rooted in constructivist epistemology, where "knowledge and context are inextricably connected, meaning is uniquely determined by individuals and is experiential in nature, and the solving of authentic problems provides evidence of understanding" (Hannafin, Hill, & Land 1997: 94). Student-centred learning was categorized as a learning paradigm by Barr and Tagg (1995), who argue that learning paradigm environments are challenging, cooperative and collaborative.

The review of the literature shows that some researchers have identified the central characteristics of student-centred learning (Gibbs 1992; Lea et al. 2003). From consideration of the characteristics used to define student-centred learning, roles for students and roles for teachers emerge. This suggests that student-centred learning is transactional between teachers and students. As Elen et al. (2007) argue, student-centred learning entails a continuous renegotiation of teachers and students in learning process. They may execute the same tasks and assume similar responsibilities in learning process. Although learning is an active and constructive process, both teachers and students are responsible for the success of learning. In other words, teachers continuously facilitate and guide student learning by developing the student's gradual growth of responsibilities.

Some researchers have defined student-centred learning as offering the student role of actively seeking out and construct meaning from information and previous experience (Gibbs 1992; Yuen & Hau 2006). Gibbs (1992) proposed a definition that student-centred learning "gives students greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study" (p. 23). Gibbs defined this in more detail in regard to the main decision: "what is to be learnt, how and when it is to be learnt, with what outcome, what criteria and standards are to be used, how the judgements are made and by whom these judgements are made" (p. 1). This perspective also stresses student freedom and the responsibility of the individual learner to construct his/her own learning experience. Rogers and Freiberg (1994) strongly believed in personal responsibility and freedom to choose. In student-centred learning, students are no longer passive recipients of knowledge, but have more responsibility towards their own learning (Gibbs 1992; Harden & Crosby 2000; Lea et al. 2003; Yuen & Hau 2006). Student-centred learning allows students to take on more responsibility for thinking what and how to learn so that they can play an active role in their learning (Yuen & Hau 2006). The approaches focus on students' learning and what the students do to achieve, rather than what the teacher does (Harden & Crosby 2000).

Glasgow (1997) added that in student-centred learning, students are expected to gradually take more responsibility for their own learning. According to Glasgow, with the necessary experience and guided practice, the students will gain full independence, with the teacher becoming more of a co-worker. The focus is on active student acquisition of information and skills, suitable to their ability, level of experience, and educational needs. As Lambert and Mc Combs (1998) described, student-centred learning recognizes individual student differences and their unique learning styles. Many researchers support this definition by describing that this approach as involving the reversal of traditionally teacher-centred learning, placing the student at the centre of the learning process.

Some researchers define student-centred learning as a move from the role of the student to the role of the teacher. This perspective defines the student-centred approach as a shift from didactic teaching to facilitative approach. Rogers and Frieberg (1994) describe student-centred learning as a shift in power from the expert teacher to the

student learner, a process driven by the need for a change in the traditional environment. According to this viewpoint, student learning should be facilitated to meet student needs and their personal characteristics. It is expected that the teacher will perform more as a facilitator of learning rather than a presenter of information (Kember 1997) to clarify, stimulate and enhance the students' insights and ideas (Rogers & Frieberg 1994). The facilitator's role assumes several empowering attributes such as those of active listening, strong awareness of group dynamics, and maximisation of peer learning; it encourages risk taking, draws on creative resources, works with issues in the here-and-now and fosters intuition (Rogers & Frieberg 1994). The assumed outcome of effective facilitation is to influence positively the learning ethos and encourage student empowerment (Gilmartin 2001).

One of the student-centred approaches that have these characteristics is contextual learning. In the contextual teaching and learning, students are given the opportunity to construct relationship in the context of a more relevant and meaningful to them. Thus, contextual learning is often hypothesized as an effective teaching method in improving students' potential and thus make them to be more interested in learning (Johnson 2002). As an execution, emphasis should be given to the cognitive, affective and psychomotor elements and strengthened with authentic assessment. In the meantime, students are also cultivated towards the overall development of their character.

CONTEXTUAL LEARNING

Contextual learning is an approach of learning that derives from constructivism theories. The approach emphasizes student's interest and experience. It is a conception of teaching and learning that assist teachers relate subject matter content to real world situation and its application to their lives as family, citizen, and workers and engage in the hard work that learning requires (Hudson & Whistler 2007). The purpose of the approach is to motivate the learners to take charge of their own learning and to relate between knowledge and its application to the various contexts of their lives. According to Vygotsky (1978), activities and tasks that have relevance with the social context of everyday life should be a medium for learning. Teaching strategies that do not have connection with everyday

life phenomena will encourage students to perceive that learning in school as something that is separate from their everyday life experiences.

Contextual teaching and learning have five characteristics, namely relating, experience, application, collaboration, and displacement (Hull & Greveelk 1998). It is a concept of learning that guide teachers link between the material taught with students' real-world situations. When students can relate the concepts, they have affiliated them to real-life situations, it means that they have inserted the context learned to the actual situation and transformed it as life experiences (Harwell 1999). The approach emphasizes the importance of students developing the knowledge and experience to think through discovery and problem-solving activities. Students are encouraged to make connections between knowledge possessed by its application in their daily lives. In doing so, students are required to be more active and independent in their learning. Students are guided to construct their own knowledge based on factual experiences that have been obtained in everyday life.

Contextual teaching and learning involve higher order thinking, interdisciplinary knowledge transfer, as well as the collection, analysis and synthesis of information from multiple sources. For instance, project is a form of contextual open-ended activity-based learning that focuses problem solving as a collaborative effort (Richmond & Striley 1996). Moreover, project-based learning model emphasizes on problems and meaningful learning by integrating concepts from different knowledge (Blumenfeld et al. 1991).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research method was employed in this study. As a mean to collect data, in-depth interviews, document analysis and observation in the classroom have been used. Constructivism is the education that is based on experience and individual tendency as a result of the qualitative approach. The variation of individual experiences will create different life realities thus resulting the concept of multiple realities (Stainback & Stainback 1988). This method involves a case study assessing the situation and the individual, through the interpretive inquiry process. This is to comprehend the issues or social issues by highlighting the uniqueness of the studied environment (Stake 1995).

According to Cohen and Manion (2003), a qualitative study involving

"a collection of a variety of empirical materials - case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional and visual text-that, describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual's lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand".

Qualitative approach has proven to manage in obtaining in-depth information in regards to the study done. It helps giving a clear illustration in accordance to the predefined variables (Creswell 2007). This qualitative approach allows the researchers to ask about the subject feelings, opinions to support the facts with more in-depth information based on the result that is not be able to obtain just from the questionnaire. Thus, from the study, a qualitative approach was feasible enough to be used to obtain detailed information about the informants teaching and learning process based on events, processes and structure of their real experience. This is because a qualitative study has the tendency towards understanding the phenomenon and the human condition from the perspective of ideas, feelings, motives and beliefs of their actions and what is happening around them (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The research holistically is appropriate to display the elements that were examined in this study environment.

In this research, interviews were conducted using in-depth, semi structure interview. The interview protocols were developed based on the research objectives. Interviews were used to retrieve information in regards to facts, beliefs, feelings, desires that are based on the research questions. This research further conducted observation in the classroom to observe the subject i.e., the Islamic Education novice teachers at its natural habitat (classroom). In addition, this research also approaches the documentation analysis approach. Researchers need to require documents on related data. The aim is to support the existing findings.

Then, data from this study were analysed using M & H Interaction Model Qualitative Data Analysis (Creswell 2007). Data analysis was also carried out with the help of NVivo program, a computer software designed specifically for the analysis of qualitative data, through application of the concept-based and inductive analysis (Bazeley 1997).

Research participants were amongst secondary school Islamic Education novice teachers from four different zones (north, south, east coast and East Malaysia), who were recruited by using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was applied to identify and select research participants because it enabled the incorporation of the research interest and purpose (Creswell, 2007). The process of recruiting the informants started with seeking approval from the Ministry of Education, then followed by obtaining a list of Islamic Education teachers and their years of teaching experience from the selected State Education Department. From the list, the names of novice teachers, i.e., who have less than five years of teaching experience were selected. Thus, the purposeful sampling of the study was based on the following criteria: (1) informants were Islamic Education teachers, (2) had a background in Islamic Studies, with either the Diploma, Bachelor or Master degree, and (3) had less than five years of teaching experience. Afterward, ten novice teachers who served less than five years of teaching were chosen for this study. Out of ten informants, only seven gave permission to be interviewed and observed during their classroom teaching. The other three informants opted for interview only for personal reason. As a result, only data from the seven informants will be presented and discussed in this article.

TABLE 2. Research Participants

Informants *	Teaching experience (years)	Qualification
Anuar	2	Bachelor of Islamic Education
Aisyah	2	Bachelor of Islamic Education
Abqari	2	Bachelor of Islamic Studies
Ayu	3	Bachelor of Islamic Education
Ilham	3	Bachelor of Islamic Studies
Saleha	4	Bachelor of Islamic Studies
Nazihan	2	Bachelor of Islamic Education

*Pseudonyms are used in this article to preserve the anonymity of the research participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From verbatim transcripts and classroom observation, the findings showed how Islamic Education novice teachers build students' character through the implementation of contextual learning approaches. In this study, the character-building process was found to be helpful in two ways: 1) translating the purpose of education through contextual learning activities; and 2) encouraging students to relate the topics learned with daily activities.

TRANSLATING THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION THROUGH CONTEXTUAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES

According to the Islamic perspective, the purpose of education in Islam is to develop the whole person in a way that all knowledge acquired by him will become organic to his total personality (Ashraf 1985). Data analysis revealed several efforts taken by the novice Islamic Education teacher participants in their endeavours to build students' character by translating the goals of education via contextual learning activities.

As a beginning teacher, Anuar related his teaching process with the purpose of education in Islam. He seems to believe that through active learning strategies, students can be trained to gain an integrated and balanced growth. Excerpts from Anuar reflect his understanding about the purpose of education and the approach he implemented during his teaching in order to translate it to his students.

The ultimate goal of education in Islam is to produce a good person. Thus, a student is considered as a good person when he/she acknowledges that he/she has been created to serve God and be His vicegerent. Thus, education should cater for the integrated and balanced growth of a student in all aspects of his/her nature… in my case, I focus more on students' character and moral through their learning activities, then I related the topics taught with their lives, daily live' activity. I guided them how to absorb the best values from the lesson with their lives…for example, how to behave with parents, neighbours… nowadays, there are so many learning activities that we can apply in classroom and at the same time can relate with their *akhlaq* …

(Anuar, ISNT03-01)

As a Muslim teacher, it is not surprising when Anuar related his teaching strategies adopted with the purpose of teaching in Islam, which is to guide and help learners to be good individuals in all aspects of lives. This reflected his philosophy of teaching that teachers do not merely transmit knowledge to students; but are also responsible for actively developing students as whole, in the spiritual, emotional, and physical domains. Anuar related his teaching strategies with his attempts to discover individual differences among students, in order to develop them as good Muslims. In Islam, the formation of good character is concerned (*akhlaq*). The major purpose of education is to produce God-conscious (*taqwa*) men who obey God's commands and avoid His prohibitions, and who would also be useful to the community.

Moreover, Islam has been recognised as an important component in the moulding of the national education system. This can be evidenced from the formulation of the Malaysian National Education Philosophy in 1988 (Ministry of Education 1988). The Malaysian National Education Philosophy holds educational principles and goals that are consistent with the Islamic philosophy for education. With "belief and devotion to God" as its main principle, the document directs the goals and mission towards the accomplishment of an educational aim for the country. The National Education Philosophy that emphasizes the importance of a balanced and integrated growth for individuals supports the main purpose of education in Islam.

This was supported by another novice teacher participant, Aisyah, who stated that the key role for a teacher was to guide students for the happiness in their lives. She related with the purpose of education in Islam, when she referred to "*Islam emphasizes the proper development of the individual, that must be integrated between the material and the spiritual elements*". She seemed to endorse Islamic teaching philosophy as her belief when she related the purpose in choosing teaching strategies with the purpose of teaching in Islam. She explained that teachers should adopt effective learning strategies in order to enhance students' positive moral development.

The main purpose of teaching in Islam is to provide assistance and guidance to learners… so, through the effective teaching strategies, we can help our students in many ways, rather than only provide knowledge… in other words, teachers should knowledgeable in employing active learning approaches… good learning strategies will lead to good moral development…I myself always give example during my lessons…story to them about good and bad behaviour and the effects of them in life. By doing this, the students seemed to well understand the importance of the topics, that is not just for the purpose of exams, but most importantly for life… I think this is what we call as meaningful learning…

(Aisyah-ISNT08-02)

Well…the fundamental objective of education from an Islamic perspective is to make balanced and integrated growth of students. This is because education in Islam represents as a way that aims to educate individual to be a good person. Therefore, as a teacher, we should train a student as a whole being… teaching approaches should necessarily be aimed at students' spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical aspects… then teacher should relate the lessons and classroom activities with students' behaviour in class…for example, when asked students to discuss in groups, guide their manners in communicating with friends…

(Aisyah-ISNT08-02)

Education in the context of Islam is regarded as a process that involves the complete person, including the rational, spiritual, and social dimension. As noted by Al-Attas (1979), the comprehensive and integrated approach to education in Islam is directed toward the "balanced growth of the total personality… through the training of Man's spirit, intellect, rational self, feelings and bodily senses… such that faith is infused into the whole of his personality" (p. 158). Moreover, Halstead (2004) suggests that the key aim of education is to guide, as people are not able to gain their ability and potential automatically. This has been supported by Yaakub (2009) who argues that through education, individuals achieve self-confidence and self-dependence, and also become strong physically and mentally.

The interviews revealed that the novice teacher informants related their teaching strategies with the purpose of teaching in Islam, which is to guide and help learners to be good individuals in all aspects of lives. Another informant, Abqari, related his teaching strategies with his attempts to discover individual differences among students, in order to develop them as good Muslims.

Through various classroom activities, we can realize our students' differences, strengths and weaknesses… we then can help and guidance them to grow as a good student with good personality…

(Abqari, ISNT07-04).

This was supported by his colleague, Ayu, who stated that the key role for a teacher is to guide students to have good personality, in order to acquire happiness in life. She related the importance of personality building with the purpose of education in Islam, when she referred to

Islam stresses that a good education means can bring good *sahsiah, akhlaq* and positive behaviour … so teachers need to emphasize these elements when teaching…should focus on students' proper developments… that's why in my teaching, I normally opted learning activities such as presentation in front of the class, also small group discussion… asked them to settle

situations in problem-based learning…I believe those strategies can focus on their character, their behaviour… I practically observed how they talked, how they respond to their friends…

(Ayu-ISNT-06-03).

As a novice teacher, Ayu seemed to endorse Islamic teaching philosophy as her belief when she related the purpose in choosing teaching strategies with the purpose of teaching in Islam. She explained that *"all teachers should adopt effective teaching strategies in order to enhance students' personality development"* (Ayu, ISNT06-03). In Islam, personality also known as *al-Syakhsiyyah*. It derives from the word syakhsun (شَخْصٌ), which means person (Ahmad Warson Munawwar 1997). Personality is also known as morality. *Al-Syakhsiyyah al-Islāmiyyah* shows a person's personality is determined by the way they think and the way they behave. The way of thinking refers to the way a person thinks of something according to a certain standard or how one relates facts to previous information (and vice versa) based on a certain standard. While the way of behaving refers to the action to meet his needs and desires (Taqi al-Din al-Nabhāni 1994).

ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO RELATE THE TOPICS LEARNED WITH DAILY ACTIVITIES

Student-centred learning has triggered a new culture that encourages change on teachers and students' role. Teachers act as facilitators to assist and facilitate the learning activities of students while students will have to become more active and responsible towards the process and manipulate information to make decisions. According to a student-centred learning, knowledge is actively constructed by learner (Barr & Tagg 1995). This approach emphasizes the role that students must be active in the dynamic learning process than passive. The role of students changes from passive in receiving information to a student who is responsible for processing and manipulating information and decision making. Students will not only receive and absorb everything that transmitted by the teacher, but also tailor any form of new information with existing knowledge to acquire new knowledge. Students will have the opportunity to engage and participate in learning activities in the classroom, and not merely be a listener and note taker. This approach provides an appropriate opportunity for students to be more responsible and demonstrate their true ability in the learning process. In other word, students will not learn by 'kettle and

cup' as they will be in charge of all the knowledge they acquired.

As a novice teacher, Ilham seems to believe that a teacher is responsible to assist students increase their level of potential and ability, as well as to provide knowledge. Teachers are, therefore, considered as the facilitators of learning, as well as the experts in knowledge. The data showed that Ilham's response regarding his role as a teacher was influenced by his teaching philosophy.

Students can gain more learning potential and ability through classroom activities. Therefore, I provide opportunities for them to participate in classroom activities such as group works, discussion, presentation and others… as a teacher, it is our role to improve our students' potential… the teacher's role not merely on transferring knowledge, but also includes developing students' abilities as well as improving their intellectual and personalities… through merely lecturing in class, all this purpose cannot be achieved. We must incorporate learning strategies that can build their characters, personalities and values…

(Ilham ISNT01-05)

Saleha made similar statements about teaching. During the stimulated recall interview, she related the importance of managing different students' personalities with teaching perspectives. Her belief reflected her teaching philosophy that all teachers must be good with their students. She explained that a teacher must be good to students and treat them as his/her own children. A good teacher cannot remain silent while his/her students choose the wrong behaviour but should provide advice through suggestions and encouragement. Being good to students is among a teacher's duties towards students, as a teacher should not concentrate on students' learning only, but also give attention to their conduct.

As teachers, we have to deal with different students' characters and personalities. Through classroom learning strategies, we have opportunities to know different learning styles and different personalities… we might meet positive personalities as well as negative ones. But our role as teachers is to not label our students…, although they may have problematic characters…

(Saleha ISNT02-01).

We want to build students to be good people, not only in academic performance, but we must also focus on students' whole development, to be good individuals…

(Saleha ISNT02-04)

I always involve my students in doing learning activities… that will make them better in gather information…. At the same time, the activity can also stimulate self-confidence attitude among them. They can bravely explain the information obtained. The

exercise conducted also seemed had encouraged them to express their thoughts orally or in writing reflectively…

(Saleha ISNT02-01)

I assigned them with a project… by conducting the project, I believe they will learn a lot of values, such as responsibility, teamwork and leadership…how to lead a project accordingly, then values of unity, caring and respect differences, and learning takes decisions in group...they must know how to behave properly in handling a project…

(Saleha ISNT02-03)

Contextual learning involves learning through direct experience. Students do not merely collect the information from teachers, but directly involved in the learning activity and are responsible for the results obtained. The experience or reality-based learning will be beneficial because teachers and students work together. The students will have meaningful learning through the experience. During the process, they will experience a lot of activities that need them to be tough, critical, creative, responsible, trustworthy, leadership, team work and other soft skills required during their life. These will build their personality and character, as contextual learning can encourage students to have a more positive attitude in learning. The excerpts above from Saleha showed that as a teacher, she is not only responsible for transmitting knowledge to students, but also has the duty to build a student's personality and character, by facilitating, motivating and guiding their learning process. This means that she played her role as facilitator in developing and building student knowledge and personality. The approach can help learners explore their feelings, attitudes, values and perceptions, skills development, building empathy and feelings of others.

For Nazihan, she made an effort to build students' character through problem solving strategies in small groups of students. She explained how she guided her students to solve problems regarding moral issues and asked them to propose with effective solutions that can be used in their daily lives. The data showed that she applied the contextual learning approach, which the purpose is preparing the students to have opportunity in relating the learning activities with real lives. Furthermore, by doing the activities in smaller groups, the students can help the others who need their assistance in an effective way. Nazihan mentioned that:

I always welcome my students to ask me questions…as I believe questioning is one of the parts in teaching and learning process. So, when students ask something, that's because they want to

know something that they do not know… They are curious the get the answer of their problem…as teachers, we should try our best to facilitate them…

(Nazihan ISNT 04-03)

I will engage students in discussions about the lesson through learning activities, then inviting them to solve the problems emerged from the topic… by doing so, the students seemed more motivated. I guided them to give opinions based on their activity…also teach them how to support their friends' opinions…some of them didn't know at the beginning on how to response nicely to their friends… but eventually they can do it…they even can explain politely

(Nazihan ISNT 04-03)

Sometimes I apply learning activity like doing project. For example, when the topics discuss elements regarding "Al-Qur'an", "Pillars of Islam", "Obeying Allah", "Obeying Prophet Muhammad" and "Obeying Parents". I gave them issues to be solved, then asked them to build connection of their solving strategies with their own lives, their loved ones…surprisingly, they managed to settle the issues… they can explain their solutions nicely, and very confident…

(Nazihan ISNT 04-03)

The approach conducted by Nazihan aimed to make the students understand from the beginning about the importance of respecting opinions from the others, so that the students can understand their character well. Instilling values education to students through learning process is very important in building students' character awareness in the future. The integration of character education is the most fundamental method for building the personality and behaviour, aimed to raise students' awareness and make the students more sensitive to their behaviour.

The data has also revealed that contextual learning can boost the students' interest and foster healthy and positive social interaction towards achieving learning goals, as well as enhance critical thinking skills among students. The study showed that the application of group activities and group assessment had increased the creative thinking process among students. Through contextual learning, students will be actively involved and able to undergo meaningful experiences through real objects that they obtained from their own environment. According to Johnson (2002), contextual learning can be used in critical and creative thinking as well as provide opportunities to use high level thinking skills in real life situations. Slavin (1991) states that knowledge gained through self-discovery will be more meaningful than those obtained through lectures or explanations of others, and are easily applied in new situations.

In other words, contextual learning approach will help students to discover by themselves, develop an understanding from new experiences that are integrated with early experience.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study fill the gap in identifying and exploring on how Islamic Education novice teachers implement contextual learning approaches to build students' character. The data showed that their roles were not restricted to teaching and learning, but also nurturing students to prosper a balanced life as well, which coincides with the expectations of the Ministry of Education who called for a holistic education. They successfully served as facilitators to guide students by choosing appropriate pedagogy so that students can develop their knowledge as well as personality. This is in line with the concept of the 21st Century Education that suggests teaching and learning approaches should influence student learning outcomes by taking into account the 4K criteria involved; i) communication, ii) critical thinking, iii) collaborative and, iv) creativity. Each of these elements needs to be dismantled and absorbed in the learning curriculum syllabus during the teaching and learning process. Moreover, there has been an effort to increase "2C" in the 21st century education, which is "citizenship and character". In this sense, all novice teacher informants in this study managed to teach students to learn values, morals, ethics, and character through the contextual learning approaches which relate to the norms of their daily lives in school. The approaches can develop students' character from their actions or the actions of others in the school.

From the findings of the study, contextual learning approach can be considered as an alternative preventative in its role to build a better student generation. As an alternative preventative, the approach is expected to enhance the quality of the students in various aspects that can reduce various issues due to social character. The school as a character building is expected to prepare students with certain identity based on the values of the nation. Thus, in addressing the purpose of preparing current student generation with the positive personalities, characters and knowledge, it is essential to ensure effective teaching and learning approaches are implemented in order to assist them competitively and relevant with current transformation.

The success of education system is judged not only by the academic achievements of students, but also the quality of the people the education produces, including their knowledge, integrity, character, attitude, their ability to be team-players, their sense of responsibility and commitment to the nation and the community they belong. In other words, improving the quality of education is also directed at improving the quality of students' character and personality as good human beings, through training and thinking process in order to have competitiveness in facing global challenges. Therefore, novice teachers' role in character development is an important objective of education system. Excellent quality education is an effort to develop the younger generation to be people with quality traits that will be the asset of the nation in the future. A supportive teacher can be like a sun that shed its light towards the classroom. Supportive teacher behaviours include listening, giving hints and encouragement, being responsive to student questions and showing empathy for students.

In Ihya Ulum al-Din, al-Ghazali (1978, vol 1, p. 60) wisely stated that;

The duty of a teacher is to dissuade his students from evil ways with care and caution, with sympathy and not with rebuke and harshness, because in that case it destroys the veil of awe and encourage disobedience. He will show kindness and sympathy to the students and treat them as his own children.

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