

## Harnessing the Potential of Pre-School Pupils Through Religious Education Teaching and Learning

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**Abstract:** The objective of the study is to explore the potential of pre-school pupils' in the teaching and learning process (P and P) of religion education in preschool. The objective of preschool education is to develop the pupils' potential comprehensively through integrating fun, creative and meaningful learning. Therefore, teachers should play a proactive role with the knowledge they have and possess the determination to achieve this goal. Religion education is one of the most important fields of education to be emphasized, so that pupils can understand and implement the real Religion teaching. This research is a pilot study with a qualitative approach in terms of the case study and observation as the main instrument. The data were based on the observation from interviews and document analysis. Sampling method had been used to select the participants who had a diploma of education from education institutions, participated and received training from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and had experiences in preschool teaching for >3 years. The results of the study revealed that there are roles in both teachers' and pupils' characters in the teaching and learning process (P and P) of religion education in preschool to develop the pupils' potential. The main characteristics of the teachers were in the terms of their personal techniques and models while the pupils' potentials that had been developed were in terms of their spiritual and socio-emotional values. The data from this study had produced the model of teacher's characters in Harnessing the potential of pre-school pupils that can be used by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, private entities, teachers and parents in relation to children's education in preschool.

**Key words:** Harnessing the potential of pre-school pupils, religion education, preschool, qualitative study

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### INTRODUCTION

The National Preschool Curriculum Standard (KSPK) aims to develop the children's potential in comprehensive and integrative ways in terms of physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social through a safe and cultivated learning environment and obedience to Allah (Fazlina Jaafar *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, spirituality is an important element in education. According to Rahman *et al.* (2012), failure to inculcate the spiritual aspect in the children's lives will thwart the National Education Philosophy. Thus, the question is how to embed the socio-emotional and spiritual aspects towards preschool children. Hence, parents and educators have to be aware of the rapid developments of children aged 0-6 years and comply with this progress through appropriate and meaningful ways (Jaafar *et al.*, 2013). The teachers also must perform fun, creative and meaningful learning

activities (Aziz and Jair, 2009; Noh, 2004) to improve the children's skills, confidence and positive self-concept. Pre-school pupils between the ages of 4-6 years old require assistance, supervision and guidance from parents and teachers who have the parental roles in the school. Thus, teachers who are creative, knowledgeable, diligent and enthusiastic are able to develop the pupils' potential with success.

This study only discussed on the spiritual growth and development of the socio-emotional aspect. Islam emphasizes on the spiritual development of children, especially the development of faith and knowledge of Islam itself. Islam recognizes the potential development of human beings since their childhood based on nature. This has been mentioned in Surah al-Tin, verse 4 which means, "We have indeed created man in the best of moulds". The spiritual potential development is carried out by making the teaching of Islam and moral acts as a routine. Ibn

Khaldun in his book *al-Mukaddimah* had viewed on children's education and stated that the Quranic education must take precedence over the others.

Islamic scholars concluded that religious education is an exercise developing the potential of physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social values guided by the knowledge to achieve the goal of producing a perfect man submitted to God Almighty which encompasses faith, morals and sharia (Mohd *et al.*, 2011). Thus the process of developing the potential of the spiritual and socio-emotional needs should be in accordance with the conditions and culture of a society based on Islamic law. According to Hamjah *et al.* (2012) the spiritual aspect should be emphasized in the learning activities of students to empower strong faith, especially in the pursuit of success. Ishak (1995) further stated that the goals of religious education are not only for physical perfection but also emphasizes on ruhiyyah. A healthy spirit can produce a perfect physical being. The story of Muhammad should be shed some light upon, from whence he came from the noble families of Quraysh, the Prophet Muhammad's life according to the traditional Arab society in his time when he was sent to a wet nurse after he was born a few days to a woman from the village with good characters and environment, good health and social life. He was not given excessive indulgence but had the freedom to move and play in the yard and side hills and can breathe clean air. The Prophet was also taught to rear goats. He displayed many forms of spiritual discipline such as patience, faith in God, leadership, stoic, stern, wise and loving. The early childhood life of Muhammad is taught to expose and train the potential for spiritual development and social development. Thus, the formation of Muhammad's personality is a complete development.

Giesenberg described spirituality as a natural part of a person. It is a consciousness or awareness of the world around him, a sense of compassion and love for this world and what is in it. It could include a relationship with a transcendent being, which can also be immanent in the individual.

Everyone needs spirituality in their lives, especially children. They need to develop the potential of spirituality, since childhood. Spiritual and social are interrelated and they reinforce each other. The difference of understanding the spirituality of Muslims and other religions are not much different.

**Literature review:** The development of individual potential can be improved by training and stimulation.

According to Shahrin Yusof Hashim and Boon and Rohaty Mohd. Majzub and Abu Bakar Nordin, child development continues naturally and following the same developments but with different rates. Genetic and environment are two important factors that influence this development. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun have pointed out that knowledge which is nurtured since childhood will stand as a foundation for further education. Teachers have roles in teaching fard 'ain knowledge and pupils should be taught this since childhood as a form of preparation for their future challenges. Recognizing this issue, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has made the Foundation of Spirituality, Attitudes and Values as one of the aspects developed in preschool. According to Rahman *et al.* (2012), the word fard 'ain itself brings an understanding of the duty of Muslims to carry out religious commands to each individual even though the obligation is to those classified as mukalaf. A deep understanding of faith and religious education facilitates students to understand the duty to obey the commands of Allah SAW (Ghazali *et al.*, 2015). A study by Hamjah *et al.* (2012) found that the spiritual aspect plays a big role in motivating the students to study diligently to achieve success. Although the fard 'ain duty is obligated to Muslim adults, Muslim children in preschool are given this education so that it is easy for them to perform the obligation properly when they grow up (Rahman *et al.*, 2012).

As children tend to be more honest and excited towards magic and imagination, educators can use techniques that are appropriate with the environment to foster their spiritual development. Educators need to give their students the opportunity to think deeply, be aware of the surrounding environment and allow them to give their views and opinions as well as find the answers for their own self and share with others. Spiritual education begins with knowledge and then the practice that will produce faith. The practice, on the other hand, is carried out through habits and exercises. Prophet (SAW) taught his companions through examples, explanations and observations.

The socio-emotional development of pre-school pupils happens all the time, especially during the teaching and learning process (T and L). Pre-school emphasizes this development to foster the achievement of positive emotions, build a positive self-concept and have communication skills and social abilities. Teachers and parents play an important role in the formation of socio-emotional potential among pupils. Effective teachers must first be able to control their emotions in all circumstances during the teaching and learning (T and L) process in the classroom (Ismail *et al.*, 2016; Hassim *et al.*, 2012).

Therefore, the potential development of spiritual and socio-emotional has been developed through the Foundation of Spirituality, Attitudes and Values as well as Physical Appearance. Pupils are expected to adopt religious values in their daily lives, have the emotional maturity, able to interact with others, able to carry out their responsibilities independently and in group and know how to respect the feelings and rights of others and in turn, they will be able to have positive relationships with adults and peers. Zainora Daud and Rosfazila Abdul Rahman stated that Al-Ghazali also emphasized on the importance of socio-emotional development through the learning techniques by playing.

Sawari and Mat (2014) and Yahaya (2005) stated that the positive development of socio-emotional of children can help their cognitive development. Balanced relationships with peers and teachers can boost their love, help each other and guide them to control their emotions as well as strengthen their confidence and maturity. Besides this, children should be taught about good friendship, the feeling of sympathy towards each other, the ability to cope with personal problems, determination and the ability to work in groups (Sawari and Mustaffa, 2014). Shahida *et al.* (2013) also believed that the development of emotional intelligence of children affects their overall personal development. Thus, a good and balanced socio-emotional development has major impacts on the development of each student.

All children are born with their own uniqueness and specialties. Every child has different physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual and social developments depending on their family background and environment. However, the children's potential can be honed and developed through a fun learning environment. Teachers play an important role in assisting this development. Putri *et al.* (2005) noted that quality teachers will produce quality students. Hence, teachers have big roles in the process of developing the preschool children's potential. They are role models in all aspects of behaviour; they act as disciplinary supervisors, changing agents and intermediaries between parents and pre-school. Moreover, teachers also need to be creative and clever in choosing appropriate games and activities for the socio-emotional development among pupils (Ashiabi, 2007). Ashiabi (2007) also concluded that socio-dramatic games could have a positive impact on pupils' socio-emotional development. The study by Sauria Amiruddin and coauthors found that children who attended the preschool program have a high willingness to continue their learning in primary school due to the effect of socio-emotional development that has been grown during preschool.

As a conclusion, the teacher's role is very important in educating the pupils' sense, spirit and soul. Teachers are also responsible in building their spiritual and socio-emotional potential. Therefore, adequate and appropriate education and training are necessary in order to make the teachers as the murabbi of the community who can educate upright generations.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research was a pilot study that employed a qualitative approach in terms of using case study and observation as the main instrument. The data was based on the observation from interviews and document analysis. Sampling had been used to select the participants who had a diploma of education from education institutions, participated and received training from the Ministry of Education (MOE) and had experiences in preschool teaching for more than three years. This research focused on the performance of teachers in developing the pupils' potential in two aspects which were spiritual and socio-emotional developments.

The study was conducted in a private pre-school and a national pre-school. Both pre-schools were located nearby to the researcher's residence in order to facilitate the data collection and the research efforts could be focused on entirely (Creswell, 2014; Marohaini, 2001). The selected primary school was a school that had pre-school classes as well though not all schools were allowed to have pre-schools.

The validity and reliability of the research were derived from the selection of participants who met the selection criteria; and the data collection using three techniques which were observation followed by interview and analysis of documents. All data were confirmed by the participants. Observation checklists and interview protocol were approved by the supervisor and seven experts in the field of education. A letter of authorization to carry out this study was obtained from the researcher's own university, the Ministry of Education and the State Education Department. After each observation and interview, the participants signed a confirmation form regarding the matter.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 1 below showed the summary of the teachers' behaviors through T and L in the classroom. There are a variety of ways to develop the spiritual and

Table 1: Summary of the development of spiritual and socio-emotional

Themes	Teachers behaviors	The development of spiritual and socio-emotional
The development of spiritual and socio-emotional	Teachers help pupils to develop morally, creatively and ethically	Development of spiritual Teachers developed the pupils' potential with a variety of ways through T and L in the classroom The teachers were always positive, calm and systematic in T and L Teacher began the T and L with greetings, and then asked the pupils to pray together The teacher said hello and was answered by the pupils with fun and happy responses Development of socio-emotional Teachers were concerned about their pupils and the pupils obviously had fun and were calm to start the T and L session The teacher praised them, "Good, clever" and asked the pupils to clap

social-emotional of pupils through T and L in the classroom. Data collection through observation, interview and document analysis had discovered that teachers developed the pupils' potential with a variety of ways through P and P in the classroom. Since this study only focused on the development of spiritual and socio-emotional, the findings of the study only discussed on the development of these two aspects. The results from the observation had shown that teachers helped the pupils to develop morally, creatively and ethically. The teachers were always positive, calm and systematic in T and L. The teachers were also calm when they were faced with various pre-school student's behaviours. The teachers' behaviours provided opportunities for pupils to keep on being involved in the activities provided in an enjoyable and meaningful environment.

The spiritual development in the pre-school on the other hand showed that teachers began the T and L with greetings and then asked the pupils to pray together. Then the teacher asked the pupils to sit in an orderly manner. Though these acts seemed trivial, the emphasis on the faith in Allah SWT needs to be applied from childhood. This is because knowledge is light and the light can only go through clean souls and souls full of hope to obtain the help of Allah SWT. The ethics of teachers were similar with the opinion of Rahman *et al.* (2012) who stressed the importance of prayer for the pupils' self-care and strength. After that, the teachers said hello and were answered by the pupils with fun and happy responses, like, "Good, Alhamdulillah". These responses reflected the pupils' joy and their beliefs in Allah Almighty. The Alhamdulillah word reflected on one's confidence and thankfulness for their good health given by Allah.

One of situations would be when a teacher asked about eating, "Have you eaten yet?" and the pupils would answer with "Yes, Alhamdulillah." This situation showed that the teachers were concerned about their pupils and for the pupils to have fun and be calmed to start the T and L sessions. The pupils' socio-emotional potential like being excited, happy and calm could be fostered in lines with the spiritual potency and making the

prayer together with a belief that only Allah is the one to ask for help. Muhammad Nur Abdul Hafiz Suwaid stated that the cultivation of faith which is the belief in Allah SWT since childhood is the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW.

Each time the students answered the questions correctly, the teacher praised them; with "Good. clever" and asked the pupils to clap. This technique stimulated the students' development of their socio-emotional to be more courageouse, confident and competent to answer the questions in front of the class. These group activities also fostered the spirit of cooperation and compromise among peers. This matter was recognized by Stapa *et al.* (2012) who stated in their study that caring and skilled teachers in conducting the T and L session might be able to produce students who excel and be useful to society and country.

Based on these findings, the researchers had concluded through the formation of Teacher's Characters in Harnessing the Potential of Pre-School Pupils' Model by using NVivo 7 as shown in Fig 1. This diagram described the implementation of teaching and learning (T and L) session involving the teachers and students. The teaching was based on personal, technique and model that affected the students' learning in terms of spiritual and socio-emotional. The spiritual and socio-emotional developments were interrelated with each other. Based on the personal aspect, teachers were observed as having the parents' characters in serving their pupils. Besides that, teachers also acted as motivators and counsellors in every activity during T and L session. The ethics of teachers like accepting the students' opinions and greeting students with "Assalamualaikum wmb" provided the students with calm, happy and exciting emotions. The teachers' technique by complimenting the students would give them the courage to answer the questions asked by their teachers. This technique also helped students to be brave and confident to perform in front of their friends.

Regarding the spiritual and socio-emotional growths through activities in the classroom such as reciting prayer

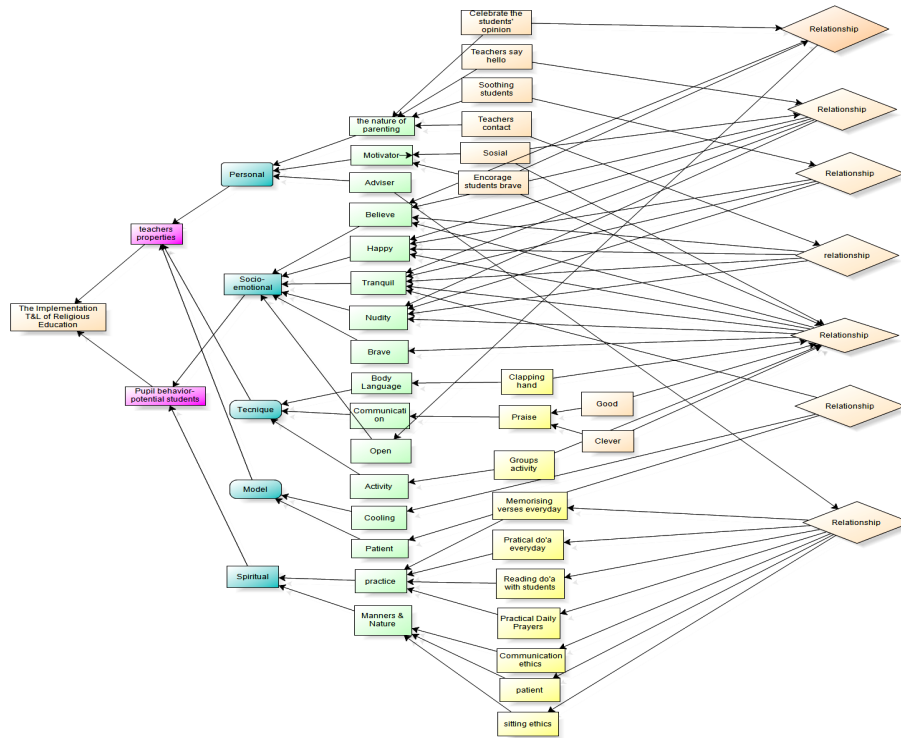


Fig. 1: Model of teacher's characters in harnessing the potential of pre-school pupils

together with pupils, exercises for prayers, reciting dua' and memorizing the Quranic verses had reflected the teachers as patient and calm counsellors who affected the pupils' spiritual to be able to implement the practices and pupils' socio-emotional to be calm and patient in gaining knowledge.

**CONCLUSION**

The teaching and learning process which is structured, systematic, relaxed and follows the prescribed curriculum can foster the pupils' potential in a balanced way. The teachers who are knowledgeable about the contents of the lessons, have deep knowledge about the nature of children as well as highly skilled in guiding children can have a profound impact on the spiritual and socio-emotional developments of pupils.

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