Quran Memorization as a Vital Identification Process of Gifted and Talented Muslim Students

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Abstract

Students for gifted program are usually selected using the traditional methods of identification (i.e., IQ and standardized achievement tests). Even for Malaysia gifted education program known as GENIUS program, the established methods such as intelligence tests are the yardstick for selecting students who are identified as gifted. GENIUS Insan, however, is a program that requires the gifted students to not only achieve high score in the standardized intelligence test, but also display the ability to memorize verses of Quran and recite them according to the correct *tajweed* (rules of Quran recitation). The students are also required to memorize the verses in a specific given amount of time. This study analyzed the identification process for gifted Muslim students for the 2021 cohort of Kolej GENIUS Insan, USIM in using Quran memorization as a method in identifying the qualified students for the program. The process involved a group of 232 candidates who had managed to score 130 marks and above in the standardized intelligence tests known as UKM1 and UKM2. These students were later tested individually for their ability to memorize and recite the selected verses pre-arranged for them. Those who fulfilled the criteria set by the college were offered to join the program at Kolej GENIUS Insan. Analyzing and understanding the data of the selection process and the outcome of the organized memorization test would help address the need to improve the identification method and make this selection process an effective way in drafting gifted and talented Muslim students to Kolej GENIUS Insan, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia.

Keywords

Gifted Program, Gifted Muslim Students, Gifted Identification, Quran

Memorization

1. Introduction

Gifted and talented education program in Malaysia started back in the early 1970s with limited success as it was done on a trial-and-error basis. During the time, there was acceleration program that allowed identified students to skip a year of class at the primary level. The move was not well-supported by parents and teachers who discovered many young kids struggled to adapt to their different age-group classmates (Mohd Isa, 1993). More such moves were introduced later without clear policy being made available for the implementation. While the Malaysian government had generally recognised the importance of the gifted students to the country, the planning and implementation had been wanting (Razimi, 2013; Mohd Isa, 1993). Throughout the education history of the country, there were some recorded programs and temporary policies being put in place by the Ministry of Education and universities.

The serious move to look into the gifted and talented education came with the introduction of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; Bakar & Zakaria, 2023). It was launched in 2013 and covers a 13-year period, from 2013 to 2025. It consists of two parts: the first part outlines the overall vision and goals of the blueprint, while the second part provides detailed plans for achieving those goals. The new policy had identified the need to promote and implement the special needs education program for the identified and qualified gifted children in the country. The blueprint emphasizes the importance of several key areas, including the development of a world-class curriculum, the use of technology in teaching and learning, the improvement of teacher quality and training, and the expansion of access to education for all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The government has committed significant resources to implementing the blueprint, including the allocation of funding for new programs and initiatives, and the establishment of partnerships with universities and private organizations to support research and development in education.

The Malaysia Education Blueprint also focuses on developing students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as their creativity and innovation. The blueprint aims to create a modern, high-quality education system that prepares students for success in the 21st century and contributes to the economic and social development of Malaysia. To achieve this, gifted education has also been placed in the national education agenda dan various policies have also been introduced.

1.1. Why Gifted Students

The early gifted and talented education PERMATA program initiated by the government in the first decade of the millennium, upheld the belief that the

education system in this country should fulfil the spirit of 'Education for all' and "no child left behind" (Zakaria et al., 2021; Suleiman et al., 2020; Bakar & Ishak, 2019; Loveless et al., 2008). It means that every student with different personal traits and quality should be given equal opportunity to develop themselves at their own rate and capability (Yoon et al., 2020; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2013; Rotigel & Fello, 2004). The only way for the different group of individuals with their own gift and talent to have the chance would be through education means and provisions stated in the government's policy (Sak & Ayas, 2020). By giving them the opportunities to develop, the country would benefit from this group of gifted individuals as human resource investment for the future. The contribution and participation of the various potential members of society will ensure the development of the country will happen at multiple levels and groups regardless of their cognitive and intellectual ability alone (Sternberg & Davidson, 2005; Peyser, 2005).

The gifted and talented group of individuals have proven their role in the success of the country as seen in many developed countries such as the U.K. and the U.S. (Zakaria et al., 2021; 2017; Bakar & Zakaria, 2023; Ishak, & Bakar, 2017). Based on previous research, many of the gifted and talented individuals have developed themselves into scientists, scholars and even Nobel laureate winners (Zakaria et al., 2021; Bakar & Ishak, 2019; Gagné, 2005; Renzulli, 2005). The high-performing students are the future investment for the nation and its civilization. With the excellent knowledge acquisition by the gifted and talented group of students, they are expected to pave way for new innovation and creation in various fields of study.

1.2. Giftedness and Education

Gifted students are generally defined as those who performed at a high level in areas like science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), leadership, arts, or language (Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Van-Tassel Baska, 1992; Worrel et al., 2019). Research shows that gifted students learn differently from other ordinary children. Gifted students are accepted as individuals with an aptitude for learning and talent (Reis, 2007; Brigandi, 2019; Hammouri, 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2018). They tend to possess mastery in each field or skill, and therefore, require special guidance to enhance their ability and quality for a duration of time (Renzulli & Reis, 2012; VanTassel-Baska, 1992; Gagne, 2005). With a proper plan and supervision from the teachers', gifted students are expected to develop and enhance their potentials over a period of time they spend in the special program (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Renzulli, 1999; Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Researches have shown that gifted students could learn at a much faster rate, earlier than their peers, have better memories, think abstractly, focus intensely, absorb many stimuli, have stronger empathy and high moral concern (Renzulli & Reis, 1997; VanTassel-Baska, 1992; Gagne, 2005; Bakar, 2017; Ishak & Bakar, 2017). There is no such thing as one size fits all concept in teaching the gifted students because of

the uniqueness in their way of thinking and studying a particular subject matter.

Most gifted program would stress on the development of students in the STEM subjects (Yu & Jen, 2020; Tan et al., 2020; Rambo & Fernandes, 2019; Taber, 2020, Jelinek, 2013). At the same time, language proficiency are equally important for the students as it would give them the advantage to learn STEM and other subjects at a faster rate. Language competency could enhance their ability to read, comprehend and analyze what they observe, read, and listen. The same question and challenge exist in preparing and designing suitable materials and activities for their language learning. Language learning today goes beyond the prepared textbooks and traditional teaching and learning materials. With the availability and advancement of current technologies, they might discover a lot of applications and websites developed for language learning activities. There are also many educational platforms to choose from on their mobile devices and laptops. There are free and paid applications to serve the learner's language learning objectives. For more advanced gifted students, they might take their own initiative to explore and discover the world of the internet for materials that suit their interests. Hence, the educators have to take similar effort and experiment to understand the current trends and developments available online to better prepare the materials and activities suitable for the gifted students.

1.3. Gifted Muslim Students

What makes the Islamic approach different from the standard gifted education model? Over the past twenty years, the concept of spiritual intelligence or SQ has gained considerable momentum in popular and scholarly literature (Sisk & Torrance, 2001). Howard Gardner's (1983) introduction of multiple intelligences provided an important acknowledgment that other intelligences might exist. He identified seven intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and later added naturalist, suggesting that each intelligence functions separately as an independent system.

Emmons (2000) suggested that SQ might be a subset of spirituality to provide individuals with opportunities to use spiritual abilities to solve problems (Zohar & Marshall, 2000b). Emmons said spirituality can be viewed as a set of specific abilities or capacities and may provide a variety of problem-solving skills. Gardner (2000) refuted Emmons (2000), stating there was insufficient evidence to support the concept of SQ. Gardner (2003) said the criteria for separate intelligences were judgmental and not fixed, and he viewed the concept of intelligence from a reductionist lens, whereas Emmons viewed intelligence from a holistic lens.

Emmons (2000) maintained that SQ facilitates an individual's action taking action in the world using skills to solve problems in a spiritually adaptive way. Zohar and Marshall (2000a) agreed with Emmons and described SQ as the capacity to solve problems through value, vision and meaning. Ken Wilber

(2000) described SQ as "literacy in the practice of transformation" and he further pointed out that SQ is fast becoming a leadership imperative (p. 95). Vaughan (2002) extended the definition of SQ as a "capacity for a deep understanding of existential questions and insight into multiple levels of consciousness" (p. 10).

1.4. Gifted Education and the Identification Process

Identification process in a gifted and talented education program is a crucial stage in choosing the most qualified individuals for the program as they would have to go rigorous academic curriculum which are compacted, accelerated, and enriched (VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2009; VanTassel-Baska, 2003; Peters & Brulles, 2017). The gifted and talented program which usually involves a huge amount of investment by the government should give the priorities to the most gifted and talented individuals in the nation (Alawfi, 2016). The standard criteria set for this kind of program is quite subjective and inconclusive because intelligence is not the only characteristic being measured for choosing the candidates for the program today (Peters et al., 2020; Taber, 2020; Sisk, 2016). For the gifted and talented education program, there are many forms of instruments of identification process being applied to ensure that individuals with the identified criteria are given the opportunity regardless of their origin, family background or religious belief. For multiracial communities such as Malaysia, equal chances are given to everyone without any discrimination based on race or gender and that has been the policy since the establishment of the first gifted and talented education institution in 2009, that is, Pusat PERMATA@pintar Negara, UKM.

1.5. Statement of the Problem

GENIUS Insan program aims to nurture future Muslim scholars who contribute to the global *Ummah* with the knowledge and skills accumulated throughout their development years. With proper guidance and mentoring program, the students could be growing themselves to be future scientists and experts in their chosen fields. These similar expectations in gifted education are also underlined in this GENIUS Insan program objectives yet the students are also expected to be able to use their knowledge and understanding in the Holy Quran and other religious subjects in the integration of *Naqli* (revealed) and *Aqli* (acquired) knowledge (Zakaria et al., 2021; Zakaria et al., 2017; Suleiman et al., 2020; Tamuri, 2019). The unique goal of this program is not only producing the academically able individuals but also future Muslim Scholars who are excellent in their Islamic understanding and knowledge, and thus, contribute to the development of the *Ummah* (society) and the global society. Thus, the identification of the individuals who fulfil these criteria is important to ensure the success of the GENIUS Insan program.

The GENIUS Insan philosophy of education believes that there are more to the knowledge and skills for personal development because the product of the

integrated *Naqli* and *Aqli* knowledge system should equip themselves with the values and mindset of a true Muslim scholar (Zakaria et al., 2021; Zakaria et al., 2017; Hilmi et al., 2017; Suleiman et al., 2020). The program has the Islamic Education Philosophy to guide the thoughts and feelings of a great Muslim leader, scientist, and innovator. By combining the established gift and talent identification method with the one based on Islamic Education Philosophy, the motto of nurturing Muslim scholars would be the heart of the gifted education program implemented in Kolej GENIUS Insan.

1.6. Research Objectives

The identification process for this program involved several instruments and they have been identified as the important criteria set to choose gifted Muslim students. The instruments were carefully developed to test the students' ability, aptitude and inclination towards the Islamic concepts and knowledge deemed important for them throughout their study in the program.

For the identification process, the instruments were adopted to collect relevant data the candidates' memorisation ability, aptitude and inclination towards the subjects offered in the program. Four instruments had been identified and utilized during the identification process. There were Quran memorization ability, teacher's recommendation, parents' interview and USIM 2 test—Principles of Islamic Understanding—a religious inclination aptitude assessment. Apart from the standardised intelligence tests known as UKM1 and UKM2, these instruments were part of the assessments that all candidates must pass with credible score set by the program. The minimum score for the standard intelligence test would be 130 marks as stipulated in the students' intake policy and guideline for the GENIUS Gifted and Talented Program of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (KPM). The analysis of score in the other components would determine the candidates' suitability and perceived ability to perform in the academic environment of the college.

Generally, the main objectives set in the study were:

1) To identify the important criteria in identifying suitable candidates for the program.

2) To analyse candidates' performance in all the identified instruments.

To achieve the objectives, the researchers had identified the following research questions in guiding the data collection and analysis of findings to be discussed later:

1) What are the important criteria in identifying gifted Muslim students?

2) How do gifted Muslim students perform in the standardised identification instruments?

1.7. The Common Four Identification Models

The common model of identification is introduced by Dr. Joseph Renzulli's (1978) Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness. Gifted. Dr Renzulli defined ta-

lented children as those individuals who possess, or are capable of developing, a composite of traits and can then apply them to any potentially valuable area(s) of human performance. Renzulli emphasizes that giftedness can be found in certain people (not all people), at certain times (not all the time), and under certain circumstances (not all circumstances). This comprehensive and widely accepted, world-renowned model focuses upon a combination of three components that need to co-exist simultaneously for a student to be identified as "gifted" are not reliant entirely upon an IQ score. The three components are as follows:

1) Creativity;

2) Task Commitment;

3) Above Average Intelligence (Renzulli, 1978).

The Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness Model has been updated as "Operation Houndstooth." (Renzulli, 2005). The houndstooth background reflects the interactive influences of personality and environment: Optimism; Courage; and Romance with a topic or discipline; Sensitivity to human concerns; Physical/Mental Energy and Vision/Sense of destiny.

A second model for the identification process is the Abraham Tannenbaum's Sea Star Model, which represents a psycho-socio approach to giftedness (Tannenbaum, 1986). It is restrictive in its consideration for specifying five main factors for giftedness, but the model goes beyond general and specific abilities of an individual by suggesting ground-breaking changes of providing an enriched curriculum for all children. Tannenbaum proposed to maximize chances of children reaching their full potential by exposing them to a broad range of information and experiences. This was a radical idea for its time (Snyderman & Rothman, 1987).

Tannenbaum's Model examines additional areas to represent a holistic approach of giftedness that includes specific ability, environmental, chance, non-intellective, and general ability factors as illustrated by the five tentacles of the Sea Star (Tannenbaum, 1986). Similar to Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness Model in which all three circles must be present simultaneously in an individual to signify giftedness, all five areas must also be present in Tannenbaum's Sea Star Model for giftedness to develop. Importantly, this five-point model influenced many educators to examine the complexities of giftedness because it enabled an infinite combination of possibilities to be created. A deficiency in any one area cannot be offset by the other four. In comparison to the other four areas, "Chance Factors" presents an interesting component because of its uncontrollable and unpredictable nature in the identification process of giftedness (Tannenbaum, 1986).

Tannenbaum's Sea Star Model allows for an individual's potential to become critically acclaimed performers or exemplary producers of ideas and exhibits elements that are both static (as the child is now) as well as dynamic (as the child learns and develops) (Tannenbaum, 1986). This model does not assign more value or weight to any one particular area or ray of the sea star.

A third gifted identification model is Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) (Gagné, 2005). According to Professor Françoys Gagné, an individual is considered gifted if they possess and use their untrained and spontaneously expressed superior natural abilities in at least one domain. These abilities are commonly referred to as "aptitudes" or "gifts." Gagné recognized gifted underachievers who may not be working to their full potential. Because of attention paid to distinguishing between "gift" and "talent" (Gagné, 2005), this model has been a forerunner for models in the field of gifted education.

Gagné's model supports the idea that all talents are developed from natural abilities and from learning that is influenced by both inner and outer catalysts (Gagné, 2005). Although the model has been refined several times over the past years, the main components of "Natural Abilities" and "Talent" remain the same. He offers the following list of categories in which school-aged children may excel to demonstrate their exceptional intelligence: Academics; Arts; Business; Leisure; Social Affection; Sports and Technology. In addition, Gagné also presents a list of four domains reflecting natural abilities in children that are mostly genetically determined: Intellectual Abilities (reasoning, judgment, memory, sense of observation, and metacognition); Creative Abilities (inventiveness, imagination, originality, and fluency); Socio-affective Abilities (perceptiveness, communication, empathy, tact, and influence) and Sensorimotor Abilities (sensitivity, strength, endurance, coordination, etc.). Gagné (2005) places gifted children among the top 10% of the student population. Genetic influences are commonly accepted as a dominant factor of giftedness in Western cultures when children are compared with similar age peers in the top 10%.

The High Performance Learning Framework (HPL) is the fourth model for mentioned. It was first developed by Professor Deborah Eyre and became known as The Eyre Equation (Eyre, 2016). HPL presents a formula to analyze high achievement of high ability learners and offers implications for all children in the classroom needed to experience success. Although a relatively "new" model, HPL continue to grow as it is implemented in school districts throughout China, Europe, Middle East/Southeast Asia, and North America.

In the High Performance Learning Framework, teachers and parents must provide opportunities and offer support for children ages 5-11 mainly in the regular classroom to find their natural aptitude or interest (Eyre, 2016). More sophisticated opportunities are offered as the child progresses in age. These components, in combination with "potential" and "motivation," can encourage and produce high achievement in all children, including the highly able.

The HPL Model focuses upon the concept that children must experience opportunities to help them realize their innate potential (Eyre, 2016). Thus, it represents a more inclusive approach for high ability to emerge. The formula promotes integrative education in which the classroom teacher is also the teach-

er and identifier of high ability children. However, schools are responsible for determining how to embed the four strategies into the mainstream curriculum for developing their highly able learners.

All four gifted identification models have been presented to illustrate how giftedness can differ philosophically. It is important for a particular gifted institution to select a model that can serve as the basis for identification of gifted children, and ensure that it is as inclusive as possible and distinguishes the particular kind of giftedness the institution wants to recognize in their population of students.

A more inclusive approach favoured by education systems today is one that provides equality of opportunity as a response for an appropriate education. Without being provided with appropriate opportunities that peak interest and challenge at their level of high ability, gifted children may never realize what they are capable of achieving or can realistically know what to expect of themselves.

1.8. The Concept of Giftedness from Islamic Perspective

The concept gift and talent in Islam could mean differently compared to the standard definition found in the similar program ideology based on the Western perspective, as it would focus largely on a person's intelligence to be the moral guide and standard in life for the benefit of the ummah rather than personal glory (Zakaria et al., 2021; Hilmi et al., 2017; Suleiman et al., 2020). As mentioned in the philosophy of Islamic education, human must find ways to develop oneself holistically by cultivating the highest values in the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspect (Hashim, 2005; Che Noh & Kasim, 2012). Rather than focusing on giftedness and talent as unique characteristics of a person, Islam believes that everyone is given equal capacity to develop himself at his own pace as long as he is willing to seek for knowledge and improve himself continuously until the end of one's life (Zakaria et al., 2021).

Relying on the Holy Quran and the Hadith, traditional Arab and Islamic scholars such as Al-Farabi, Al-Ghazali, Ibnu Khaldun or Rumi have always put much worth on knowledge (Wafi, 1997). The Islamic religion values not only education, but also the various dimensions of human intelligence. Thus, in Islam, not being highly intelligent does not mean that people are not required to fulfil their own potential. The prophet Mohammad encouraged everyone to seek knowledge from childhood until death. The prophet Mohammad stated that the "seeking of knowledge is a duty incumbent on every Muslim man and woman" (Wafi, 1997). Also, he emphasized that there should be equal learning opportunities for all people, male and female, rich and poor, young and old.

Both the Holy Quran and the Hadith stress the importance of learning (Ismail, 2019). Through the Angel Gabriel, Allah revealed the very first word to the prophet Mohammad, which was Iqra ("read") (The Holy Quran, 96:1). Hence, the acquisition of literacy and religious knowledge is regarded as highly impor-

tant in Islam. Allah requires all Muslims to be intelligent contributors to society, reading, learning, and acquiring knowledge. According to Islamic principles, Allah provided human beings with all the required faculties and senses to live on and develop the earth: "Say it is He Who has created you, and endowed you with hearing (ears), seeing (eyes), and hearts, little thanks it is ye give" (Quran, 67:23). So, every individual in Islamic society must fulfil his or her intellectual potential.

1.9. Quranic Thinking as a Skill in Gifted Program

In Kolej GENIUS Insan, the important process in its gifted education program is embodied in the curriculum and program implementation with the motto of "Integration of Naqli and Aqli Knowledge" (INAQ). The Naqli aspect here refers to the two main source of knowledge in Islam, the Holy Quran and the Hadith and they are incorporated into the curriculum with the Ulumuddin Syllabus with the learning elements in Quran Education subject component and other standard subjects prescribed in the national curriculum of KSSM. Quran Education is part of the Islamic Education curriculum in the mainstream Islamic school, and it is implemented in some selected Islamic government schools using the name Ulul Albab Quranic program. Mainly, Ulul Albab Quranic education subject adopts and enhances the established *tahfiz* (memorization) school Quranic education program with new approaches to the memorization technique and content study and understanding (Hilmi et al., 2017; Zakaria et al., 2017; Muhaidi, 2015).

Quranic thinking is a very important element in the GENIUS Insan gifted program as it prepares the students with the necessary ability to understand, analyze and integrate the knowledge from Quran and Hadith in their academic learning experiments (Zakaria et al., 2021; Hilmi et al., 2017; Zakaria et al., 2017). The integration process of Naqli and Aqli knowledge in USIM has been research extensively by the academics. There are many approaches have been developed and implemented to assist the process. As the future Muslim Scholars, the students in KGI study are using the compacted, accelerated and enriched syllabus and learning assignments and activities. The Quranic thinking approach is the way for them to apply, analyze, evaluate, and create the "reflected knowledge" using the Bloom's Taxonomy level of knowledge acquisition. The knowledge integration process will definitely vary from one student to another. It will take its take to take its root in students' metacognitive and intellectual ability. Yet the aim is clear. Therefore, they would use this skill as the critical thinking ability in solving issues and generate new ideas and inventions throughout their life. It will take generations to witness the proof, yet but the education process has already begun.

1.10. Islamic Education Philosophy

In the 1977 First World Conference on Muslim Education in Makkah, Saudi

Arabia, the discussion on Muslim education and its various issues and challenges was the earlier serious effort made by the international scholars to tackle this topic. The conference successfully raised the consciousness of the Muslim world to the basic issues of liberalizing secularization within the inherited public education system due to Western colonialization (Hashim, 2009). It was also the platform used by education experts to review the current practice in what was considered as the traditional religious education.

The education system in Malaysia inherited the dualistic nature of education just like other former colonized Muslim countries (Hashim, 2004). The government made efforts to resolve the problem in the late 1980s. Some of the government's actions included the establishment of national religious secondary schools, an increase in the hours of the teaching of Islamic Education as a subject at primary and secondary school levels, and the formulation and implementation of an integrated curriculum. The Integrated Curricula for Primary and Secondary Schools (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah (KBSR) dan Menengah (KBSM)) were formulated in 1983 and 1989, respectively. The curricula are integrated because of their emphasis on "developing the potentials of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God", as stated in the National Philosophy of Education (NPE) of Malaysia (cited in Hashim, 2004: p. 159). The integrated curricula call for the formation of these values across the curriculum, which implies that teachers are encouraged to instill values in every lesson that they teach, regardless of subject. The integrated curricula also introduced the subject of Moral Education for non-Muslim students, while the number of hours of Islamic Education taught to Muslim students was extended. Both subjects aim to educate students to understand, appreciate, practice, and make moral decisions according to the principle of universal values for the former (Balakrishnan, 2007) and Islamic principles for the latter. To an extent, the philosophy of Islamic Education was also formulated to guide the teaching of Islamic Education in Malaysia and complements the NPE and the Islamic Philosophy of Education (IPE) that was conceived in the 1977 First World Conference on Muslim Education in Makkah (Hamzah, 2016; Hashim, 2011).

Basic principles in the IPE aim to help every Muslim to adhere to the guiding principles of Islam outlined in the Quran and Hadith. Great thinkers and innovators such as al-Razi, al-Farabi, al-Kindi, al-Khawarizmi and Ibnu Sina proved that education based on Quran and Sunnah would develop human mind and heart (Hashim, 2004). The great Muslim civilization blossomed during the Islamic golden age due to their relentless effort in studying, analyzing, interpreting, and applying the knowledge and ideas found in Quran and Hadith. They developed a systematic approach to the study of the Quran and Hadith in which they produced a large body of knowledge in the form of books on various academic domains that still existed until today. New discoveries and innovations

during the era were the norm of the day and research was the culture that cultivated new disciplines of knowledge. Muslim scholars also realized that understanding the complexities of the universe, its order, harmony, perfection, and functioning, brought people close to God and His message.

2. Methodology

In this study, the instruments used in the gifted Muslim identification process were adopted to collect the data for analysis. There were mainly four instruments that had been identified and utilized during the process. There were Quran memorization ability, teacher's recommendation, parents' interview and USIM 2—Principles of Islamic Understanding Test—a religious inclination aptitude assessment. All these instruments were not part of the intelligence tests known as UKM1 and UKM2 which all candidates must pass. The minimum score for the standard intelligence test would be 130 marks as stipulated in the students' intake policy and guideline for the GENIUS Gifted and Talented Program of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia (KPM).

The shortlisted number of students for this intake process known as *Mukhayyam Al-Abrar* was 325 candidates. The list indicated those who fulfilled the early criteria for GENIUS Insan program. They had managed to score 130 and higher in the standard intelligence test and showed strong inclination towards Islamic education program. The identification process was planned in a few stages and it involved the academic and non-academic staff of the college to engage the potential candidates and explain about the program and the identification process. The number of candidates were then identified though their location and informed of the shortlisted students list for the 2021 intake. They were grouped and assigned to their respective liaison officer for communication purposes and sharing of information regarding the parents' interview and the Quran memorization test. All liaison officers were briefed of the process and their tasks in different stages of the identification process. All the steps in the process took between two to four weeks depending on the candidates' availability and communication responses during the period allocated for the identification program.

Covid-19 and the Tests Administration

Due to the pandemic, the identification process was carried out online to avoid the physical presence of candidates and parents at the college. The previous tests and identification program activities were carried out in a special camp program known as Mukhayyam Al Abrar that would take place at the college for a duration of three days. Similar activities would be carried out and students would be grouped and assessed by the assigned Quran teachers and STEM-subject lecturers.

The online process involved all the tests mentioned above and candidates were required to the tests and memorisation sessions online. The candidates

would be given specific slots for their sessions and timetable for the online tests. Since the focus of this paper is on the memorisation of Quranic verse, the discussion would highlight on candidates' Quran memorisation performance.

3. Results

This implementation of the identification process was done using phone calls or videoconferencing. It had produced intricate form of reactions from the interviewed parents and candidates, and left many amusing stories and quotes to be shared by the staff involved. This was the first ever identification program conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and followed the new normal in the education system since the emergence of the virus. The memorization test that involved the candidates reciting the verses assigned to them was also required to be done online using video call or videoconferencing and recorded live for assessment purposes later.

Rigorous process and strategies were put into practice to ensure the interviews and recitation produced the expected outcome without putting too much pressure on the parents and candidates. Almost all candidates were 12 years old and unfamiliar with the testing done using video calls to prevent fraud or deception during the Quran recitation and memorization test. The duration of the whole identification process was not conducive as many people were more concerned with the health threat of the pandemic and economic uncertainty to many who were facing loss of income and unfavorable job condition. Thus, based on these backdrops, there were parents who decided against sending their children to college as it would mean the children would be away during this time of insecurity. Some parents decided to even reject the offer from the beginning for reasons only known to them. The outcome of the whole identification process produced the following results: (Tables 1-3)

Table 1. Teacher's Recommendation after the Quran recitation and memorization test (Offered to join KGI).

Result/Decision	Number of Students
Recommended	124
Considered	30
Total	154

Table 2. Rejected Candidates by teachers and liaison officers.

Result/Decision	Number of Students
Not recommended	75
Strongly not recommended	3
Total	78

Table 3. Other Conditions.

Result/Decision	Number of Students
Declined	43
Withdrew	24
No Response	26
Total	93

Total number of candidates 325.

4. Discussion

The search for Future Muslim Scholars of Kolej GENIUS Insan began with the intelligent test of UKM1. More than 100 thousand pupils from all over the country embarked on this journey to be qualified as gifted. The special gifted education program such as GENIUS@pintar Negara in UKM and Kolej GENIUS Insan in USIM are providing the services and facilities for these young individuals to develop their gift and talent to their highest level. The huge aspiration for KGI USIM is to give the gifted Muslim students the skills and knowledge that would put them as the future scientists and thinkers who would develop themselves for the sake of the nation and the ummah (global society).

Last year's qualified number of candidates were a huge improvement compared to the early intake of only 50 students back in 2015 (Zakaria et al., 2017; Hilmi et al., 2017; Suleiman et al., 2017). The first phase of the student's identification process always started with the standard tests and followed by the memorization test of Quran recitation and memorization. The teachers (known as the *Muallim*) assessed the students' ability in their Quran recitation with the correct *tajwid* and their memory of the verses they were assigned to read and master. There were 154 recommended and deemed qualified candidates for the GENIUS Insan program but unfortunately the number of seats offered were limited to the available space in the college since this school is a boarding school with limited space for students' hostel and other facilities.

Another important aspect of the candidates' identification for this program would be the interview with the parents. The information shared by the parents about their children and their personalities would provide essential data that could be made into the final decision-making phase. While it was quite common that parents will highlight only the positive points about their children, the information regarding their hobbies, activities, strengths and weaknesses would also be focused during the interview. The parents' willingness and commitment toward the education process of their children could be attained through this process as dedicated parents would express their willingness to sacrifice and assist in their children's educational vocation.

Finally, the religious aptitude test of USIM1 and USIM2 also served as the indicator for candidates' level of understanding in basic principles of Islam. This

was an important aspect to be discovered among the candidates to ensure that they would be interested in the Ulumuddin subjects being taught in the college. This type of measurement on their attitude towards Quran and Hadith in general would determine the success of the implementation of one important aspect of learning in KGI which is Quranic thinking. KGI Quran Education module is specially developed to implement INAQ in all the academic and Ulumuddin subjects as proposed by the concept of school-wide enrichment program (Olenchak & Renzulli, 1989). This element of thinking is crucial in determining the candidates' potential and talent in combining the STEM subjects with the knowledge from the Quran and Hadith across the curriculum. The stage is set for the young Muslim scholars to embark on the journey to not only memorize the Quran and Hadith but more importantly to analyze and reflect in those topics and subjects they learn from the lenses of the great minds and scholars of Islam. Their quest for knowledge is not meant for them to think about the worldly gain but they would go beyond the physical attainment and bring their mind, soul and body closer to their Creator and live the greatest achievement for mankind.

5. Future Promotion of the Program

The challenge to find and choose the best candidates for the program is still being analysed and improved from time to time. Many would claim that the identification process was not rigid enough as the criteria set by the GENIUS Insan program were not meant for the typical gifted students who were more inclined towards the STEM subjects. Quran memorisation requires skills and knowledge on the part of the candidates and they need to familiarise themselves with the recitation technique and *tajweed* (rules of Quran recitation). The integrated Naqli and Aqli knowledge curriculum is one that demands the students to constantly improve their understanding in the teaching of Al-Quran and Sunna and those with weak ability in those study areas would struggle and could be left behind—a scenario that the administration would try to prevent. More engagement with potential candidates and their parents should widen the gap in understanding the requirements and preparation for the intake process for GENIUS Insan program. Better access to the intake process information and assessment would prepare the candidates early and with the appropriate measures taken to improve the identification process, there would be more quality candidates for the gifted Muslim program in the future.

6. Conclusion

Malaysia is slowly accepting the presence of the gifted and talented education system in the mainstream education. Even though the gifted education dimension in the country is still considered as at its infancy stage, the implementation of such program has shown positive and encouraging results. The number of students is increasing yearly to accommodate the larger number of qualified students into the system. The idea is to give as many opportunities as possible to

the children from all over the country to join and be in the specially designed and developed education system. The basic infrastructure in terms of curriculum, educators and industry linkages have already been established and continuously been improved with bigger participation from the industry for sponsorships and study grants.

The gifted education model which was borrowed from the Western concept of gifted and talented education system has been proven to be the working model for a general community of gifted students in the country. Both education programs for the gifted and talented students in the country have so far proven its effectiveness in supplying the services required for the gifted student's community. The concept of Islamic gifted education will be the key development area that gifted program in this country should seriously consider. Thus, the identification process of gifted Muslim students is crucial in deciding the success of gifted program in Koleh GENIUS Insan. For almost a decade now, the number of the young gifted Muslims keeps on increasing year by year. The continuous success of this program will also rely on identifying the most qualified candidates from every corner of the country. This future investment in human resource development of the nation will bear fruit of its success in the not-so-distant future, *insyaa Allah*!

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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