

The Pedagogical Considerations in Teaching Revealed Theology in Victorian Islamic schools.

Introduction:

In Islam, the study of theology, particularly revealed theology, holds significant importance. Revealed theology refers to the systematic exploration and understanding of religious doctrines and beliefs based on the divine revelations found in sacred texts, primarily the Quran and Sunnah. Revealed Theology aims “to clarify and substantiate creedal convictions and eliminate misconceptions and doubts (shubuhaat). To show that the creedal points of Islam are intelligible and true on a rational basis (that is, without recourse to the proof of the miracle of revelation).” (Acharki, 2023)

The purpose of this report was to gather insights into the various pedagogical approaches when teaching theology across primary schools across Islamic Schools in Victoria. Theology, being a multifaceted and interdisciplinary field, requires effective teaching methods specifically tailored to meet the learning needs of young students. This is to engage students and foster a deeper understanding and belief in Allah SWT. This report presents key findings and trends based on responses from students across the Grade 5 year level at an Islamic College in Melbourne, Australia.

Participants:

The survey was conducted from 01/11/2023 to 03/11/2023 and aimed to gather insights on ‘The Pedagogical considerations in teaching revealed theology in Victorian Islamic schools.’ A group of 73 individuals participated in the survey, providing a comprehensive understanding of the target population. The participants were between the ages of 10-11 years of age, 57.5% of them being female and 42.5% being male.

Methodology:

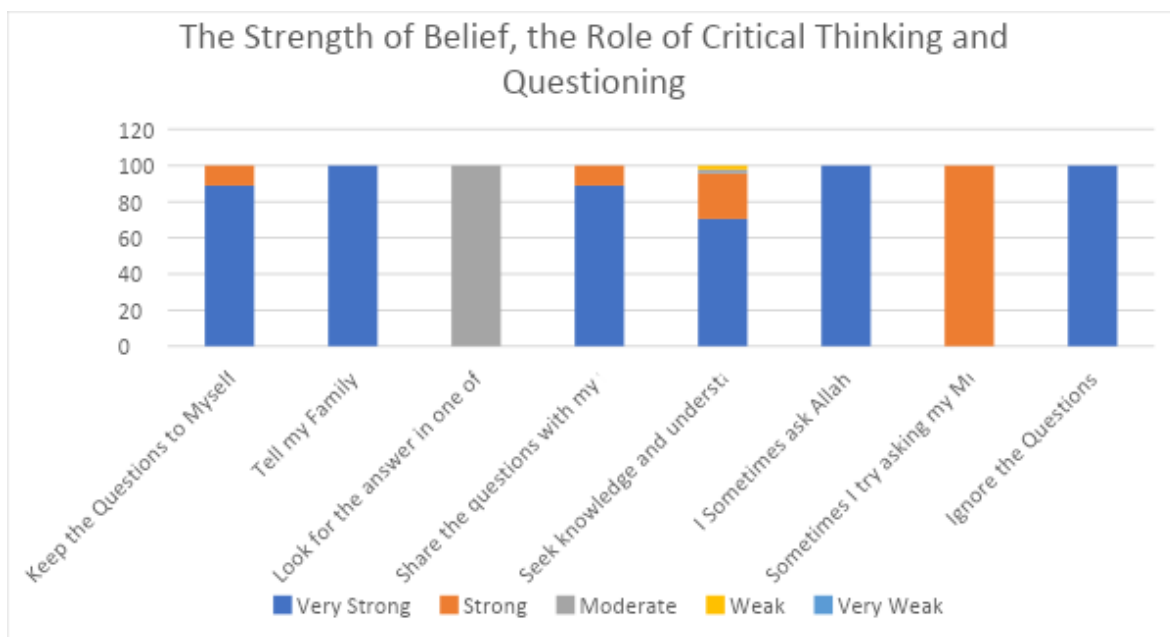
Purposeful sampling was used to survey three Grade 5 Islamic studies classes, ensuring a diverse mix of students in terms of backgrounds, academic levels, and demographics. The structured questionnaire, administered through Google Forms, incorporated both closed-ended and open-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative data efficiently.

Discussion and Key Findings:

Reasoning for Theology:

Teaching Aqeedah, theology and metaphysical concepts needs teaching practises which foster a safe, respectful, and nurturing environment, that facilitates reasoning and supports the questioning of young learners. This not only facilitates a baseline for the questioning of the students, but it also guides students to metacognition of their questioning, navigating this questioning to certainty which assists in the transformational process of deep *belief*, Nafs Lawwamah (Ibid). Allah SWT himself urges man to use their intellect in the Quran, “**And they will lament, ‘If only we had listened and reasoned, we would not be among the residents of the Blaze!’**” [Quran, 67:10]

In the journal article ‘Teaching of Islamic Doctrine and Beliefs in School Subject Content Knowledge and Pedagogical Considerations’ Ahderi et al (2012) describes “teaching technique is to motivate students, instilling creative and critical thinking skills, memorizing formulas, instruct exercise outside the classroom, memorizing concept of definitions, mental maps, and the keyword concept. The Islamic belief is that the human being has been given an intellect by God; however, this intellect cannot fully comprehend the truth without divine guidance (Al-Attas, 1979).

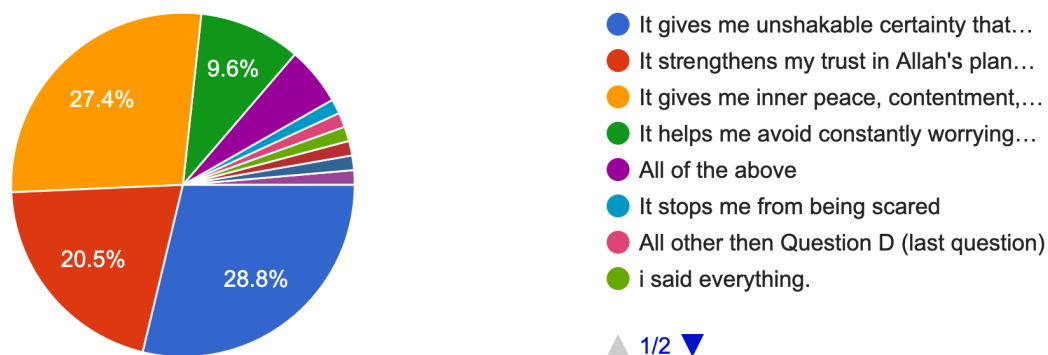


The table above suggests a link between role of critical thinking and questioning in the classroom and the strength of belief they attributed to themselves. Although the last column indicates a very strong belief in Allah SWT the sample size was significantly lower in comparison to ‘Seek knowledge and understanding from my parents or teachers’ and ‘Sharing the questions with my friends.’

Reasoning for Theology Continued:

How does certainty in believing in Allah help you in your life?

73 responses



The pie graph illustrates Grade 5 students' levels of certainty (Yaqeen) based on a survey. Results show that 28.8% feel an 'unshakable certainty that Allah exists,' 27.4% believe it 'strengthens trust in Allah's plan and promotes contentment,' 20.5% find it brings 'inner peace, contentment, and reliance on Allah's wisdom,' while 9.6% mention it helps in 'avoiding constant worry about the future.'

This pie graph has prompted further questions that require exploration, such as what Shulman describes in his book, "teaching is in fact consistent with the concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), which emphasizes teachers' understanding of content knowledge presented to students, teachers' ability to diversify the appropriate teaching methods that are easily understood by students and teachers' understanding of the characteristics and abilities of students acquired through experience, knowledge, pedagogical skills and content subjects (Shulman 1987)." It also raises questions in which methods and tools give clarity amongst students and which are not.

Philosophy of the Educator:

An educator's philosophy gives the why, how and what we do, that informs the teaching methods, curriculum choices, and classroom management strategies of a teacher. It is the intention and driving force in which steers educators to make decisions about why we to teach, what to teach, how to teach, and why to teach certain topics or concepts. As described in the lecture by (Memon, 2018) Simon Sinek describes a golden circle, in which three questions that need to be asked, how, why, and what.

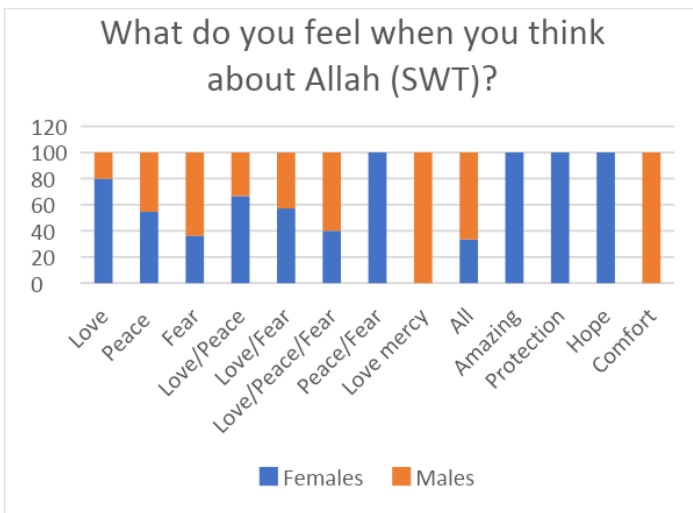
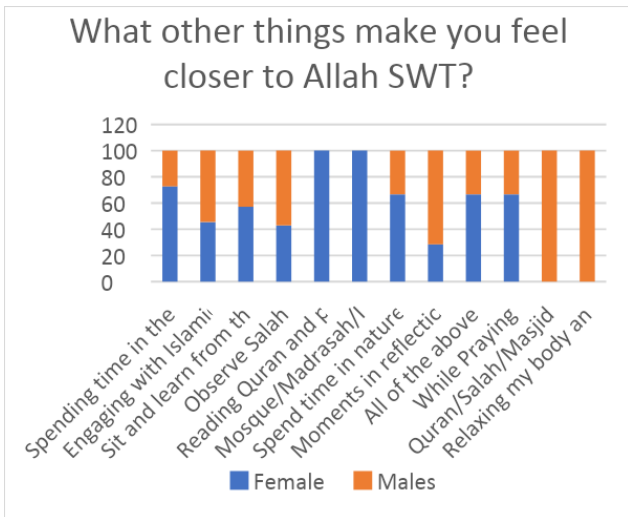
It is incumbent for an educator to include the school of theology in their teaching philosophy when teaching Islamic studies particularly revealed theology about Allah SWT.

“The believer is the mirror of the believer.” (al-Adab al-Mufrad 239)

The believer reflects Prophetic virtue, this mirror can be a means to reflect the beauty of Prophetic virtue to students by means of acquisition, giving learners to be a mirror amongst each other. Teaching with a clear philosophy is incumbent for an educator. It sets the tone for the duration of a student’s learning journey. An educator's philosophy guides and nurtures the beliefs and values of their students. It addresses moral and ethical issues in the classroom and guide students in developing their own values, perceptions and understanding in relation to Allah SWT. In which case a firm or lack of understanding of a school of theology can trickle a flow on effect of good or bad practices throughout journey of a student.

Looking at the graphs below, it was pleasantly surprising that Grade 5 students surveyed, reflected this amongst each other. This is a sentiment to the educator philosophy that seeps metaphysically into learning space.

“Understanding the characterising features of Islamic pedagogy thus illustrates the need for the teacher to connect with the student with explicit knowledge and to reach the subtle low entity of the metaphysical heart and soul. We come here to issues of belief but from an Islamic pedagogy perspective the unseen is innate to the teaching process.” (Hardaker et al 2019)



Exploring the significant gender-based variations in the emotional responses of young learners to Allah SWT reveals distinct experiences within the same educational framework. For instance, male students exhibit more fear, while females express love. Additionally, the location of spiritual connection differs, with males feeling closer to Allah through Salah outside the mosque, whereas females feel closest to Allah SWT within the mosque/masjid.

Philosophy of the Educator Continued:

Learners

- Born on *fitrah* (centrality of *tawhid*; natural inclination to know God)
- Unique with innate & unique qualities, virtues, capabilities & dispositions
- Highly receptive to learning and teaching & through potentials for growth through God consciousness (*taqwa*)
- Viewed via an asset-based view (*husn al dhan*) honouring & preserving the dignity of the child as the highest of priorities
- Already "someone", on the journey of becoming, as "vicegerents-in-the-making", & engaged, socio-critical, proactive citizens



Learning

- A sacred act
- Leading to knowledge, which leads to God
- For purpose of knowing God and to nurture and cultivate a virtuous life
- For refinement of character (*adab*) and transforming of the human condition (*tarbiya*)
- Holistic - cultivating mind, body, and soul
- Approached with excellence (*ihsan*) in mind
- A process of unfolding and drawing out, more so than a process of instilling or pouring in
- A process mediated by key concepts:
 - *ta'lim*: imparting knowledge, instructing, and making meaning together
 - *ta'dib*: modelling, practicing, and refining character, culture, and comportment
 - *tarbiya*: guiding, growing together, developing cognition, emotion, consciousness, nurturing wholeness
 - *tazkiya*: self-assessing, self-disciplining, and purifying one's spiritual self
- Focused on higher integrated objectives - development of self (*taqwa*) and social development

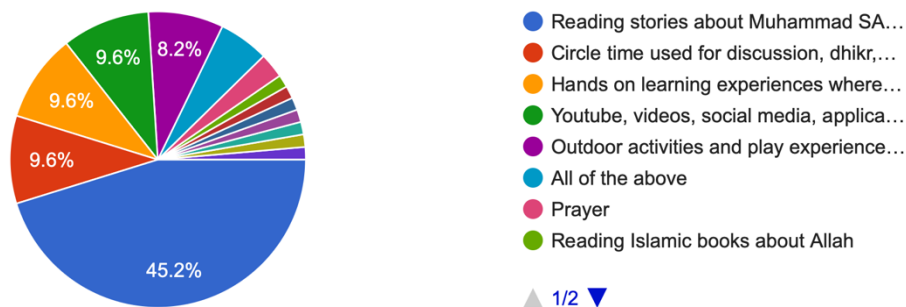
Leading Learning

- Sacred duty of the highest order
- A prophetic role of guiding towards God
- Most central aspect of what school leaders do
- Entailing the emodiment of aspirations, guiding with wisdom & values
- Reflecting Qur'anic values: good counsel (*nasiha*), sincere conduct (*ikhlas*), consultation (*shura*), dissent (*ikhtilaf*), public interest (*maslahah*), accountability (*muhasabah*), and deep contemplation and reflection (*tafakkur*)
- Distributed and dispersed, so leading extends to all engaged in leadership activities
- Demands the creating and sustaining of conditions for the whole community to engage in deep learning
- Enabled by a culture of on-going professional learning and growth
- Precipitating renewed cultures of practice, whereby educators, and others can be brave, innovative, and experimental
- Entailing steadfastly inspiring and illuminating others on purpose and distinction
- Fostering a school ethos in both inward and outward *sunnah*

The circle graph above from Centre for Islamic Thought and Education - CITE (Chown et al 2023) emphasises examples the possible philosophies that educator can adopt in relation to embodying a holistic approach.

What kind of learning experiences have helped you strengthened your relationship with Allah (SWT)?

73 responses



The graph strongly shows that the college follows Wahy-based philosophies through practices like circle time and reading stories from the seerah, prophets, or righteous companions, which are well-received by students. However, there is room for improvement in extending this learning beyond the classroom, as seen in the low percentage (8.2%) of 'outdoor activities and play experiences.'

Parents are the First Educators:

As an educator the teacher must recognise and capitalise on the fact that parents are the first educators of young learners. They are stake holders at the college and should maintain this role as one body. Edward Said (2000) “We conceptualize the Islamic world as if it were a separate, clearly identifiable civilization that we can teach on its own without a systematic analysis of the larger world in which it is both formed and constituted within.” Therefore, as Minarti (2023) has said, “The family can make an effective contribution to its education in the era of globalization and usher in success in society and happiness in its life.”

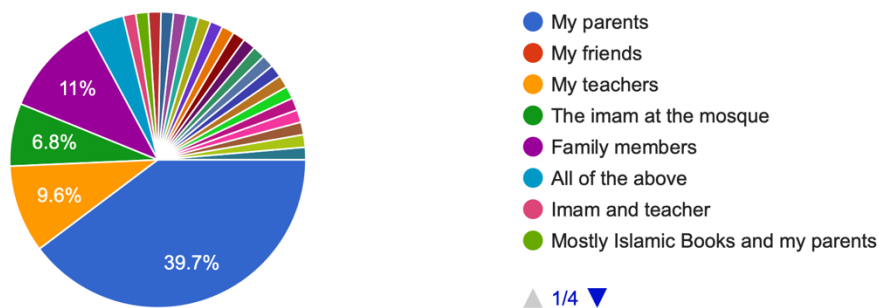
Abu Hurairah reported the Messenger of Allah (May peace be upon him) as saying:

Every child is born on Islam, but his parents make him a Jew and a Christian, just as a beast is born whole. Do you find some among them (born) maimed? The people asked: Messenger of Allah! What do you think about the one who died while he was young? He replied: Allah knows best what he was going to do. (Abu Dawud)

“Islamic schooling in Australia holds firm to asset-based views (applying the principle of Husn-ul-thani; holding positive view and high opinion) of learners and their families – as the basis of relationships, engagement and our discursive practices.” (Chown et al 2023)

Who are the people in life that have helped you understand Allah (SWT) better?

73 responses



One of the CITE review recommendations to the college was to “explore ways to enhance relationships and partnerships with parents.” The graph above demonstrates the overwhelming importance of this point.

Conclusions:

The survey highlighted effective teaching methods, the influence of educators' philosophies, and the significant role of parents as the first educators. While some conclusions were drawn, the survey raised questions about the effectiveness of inquiry-based models in facilitating deep understandings of theology and God. The incorporation of questioning through an inquiry-based model connecting science to theological concepts and the transferability of knowledge to a nuanced understanding of theological concepts warrants further exploration.

The college's adoption of a Heart Centred Design Thinking (Gould, 2023) approach promises ongoing progress in answering these questions. Recommendations include continued exploration of pedagogical approaches, enhancing relationships and partnerships with parents, and investigating the potential of inquiry-based models in theological education. This study serves as a starting point for a comprehensive understanding of effective teaching methods in the realm of revealed theology for primary school students in Islamic schools.

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