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INTEGRATING ACADEMIC AND PRACTICAL SKILLS IN TAHFIZ EDUCATION: AN EVALUATION OF THE ASSETS 2024 PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The ASSETS (Academic and Skills Enhancement Through Strategic Training) 2024 program was designed to address the gap in integrating academic and practical skills within Tahfiz education, which traditionally focuses on Quranic memorization. Conducted over three days, the program involved 21 Tahfiz students aged 9 to 17 years, providing a balanced curriculum that included both academic subjects (English and Mathematics) and practical skills (Frisbee, hair cutting, ice cream making, and body massage). The study employed a pre- and post-program survey methodology to assess the impact of the program on the participants' skills. The results revealed significant improvements in practical skills, with notable progress observed in areas such as hair cutting (71.4%) and Frisbee (71.4%). However, the improvements in academic subjects were mixed, with 76.2% of students showing progress in English, but only 57.1% in Mathematics. These findings suggest that while the ASSETS program is effective in enhancing practical skills, further refinement in the teaching methods for academic subjects is needed. The study underscores the importance of a holistic approach in education, particularly in specialized settings like Tahfiz schools, to ensure students are well-equipped for diverse life challenges.

1. Introduction

Tahfiz education in Malaysia, traditionally focused on Quranic memorization, has often overlooked the importance of integrating secular academic subjects and practical life skills into its curriculum. This gap has left Tahfiz students less prepared for diverse career paths and life challenges beyond religious studies. The need to balance religious and secular education in Tahfiz schools has been highlighted in various studies, which emphasize the importance of integrating academic and vocational skills alongside Quranic memorization. For instance, Norsalim et al. (2021) identified significant challenges in incorporating vocational skills within the Tahfiz curriculum, mainly due to financial constraints and the lack of a standardized curriculum. Similarly, the study by Bani et al. (2017) on governance in Tahfiz institutions underscores the necessity of broadening the educational scope to include practical skills, which are crucial for students' holistic development. The integration of diverse academic and practical subjects is supported by findings from the study by Yahya et al. (2020), which advocates for a balanced curriculum that includes co-curricular activities aimed at enhancing the overall capabilities of Tahfiz students. Additionally, Taat et al. (2021) found that school climate and curriculum significantly influence the academic attitudes of Tahfiz students, further supporting the inclusion of varied subjects to foster a conducive learning environment.

The ASSETS 2024 program was developed to address this issue by providing a balanced educational experience that includes both academic subjects and practical skills. Creating a holistic educational experience is crucial for the well-rounded development of students. The study by Ishak et al. (2022) on the Huffaz ProHealth module emphasizes the importance of integrating physical, nutritional, and psychological well-being into the curriculum, highlighting the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses all aspects of students' lives. Similarly, the Tahfiz Model Ulul Albab (TMUA) curriculum described by Ambo and Mokhsein (2019) is designed to produce professionals who are not only experts in religious studies but also equipped with the skills needed to thrive in various fields. However, the effectiveness of this program in enhancing the overall development of Tahfiz students has not been thoroughly evaluated, necessitating a study to assess its impact and identify areas for improvement. Evaluating the impact of educational programs like ASSETS is critical for continuous improvement. According to Daud et al. (2018), assessing the effectiveness of teaching methods in Tahfiz schools, particularly in areas such as Tajwid, is essential for ensuring that students achieve a high level of mastery. Similarly, Norsalim et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of vocational skill integration in the Tahfiz curriculum to address any gaps and improve future implementations. This research aims to fill this gap by examining the academic and practical skill improvements of students who participated in the ASSETS program, with a focus on understanding its effectiveness and guiding future enhancements.

2. Literature Review

Integrated educational programs that combine academic learning with practical skills are critical in developing well-rounded individuals who are prepared for the complexities of modern life. In Malaysia, the Tahfiz Model Ulul Albab (TMUA) is an example where the curriculum integrates Quranic memorization with secular subjects, aiming to produce students who are knowledgeable in both religious and worldly affairs (Jamil & Othman, 2023). Furthermore, the emphasis on practical skills in education, as discussed by Ibrahim and Jaaffar (2017), highlights the importance of work-integrated learning in developing students' competencies, self-efficacy, and employability skills (Ibrahim & Jaaffar, 2017). Experiential learning theories, such as those proposed by Kolb, advocate for the integration of hands-on activities to enhance learning outcomes. This approach has been validated in various educational contexts, including the Tahfiz Model Ulul Albab, where experiential learning is applied to both religious and secular subjects to create a more engaging and effective educational experience (Ridyah & Sriyati, 2019). Moreover, the implementation of experiential

learning in vocational and technical education in Malaysia has shown to significantly improve students' practical skills and their readiness for the workforce (Norsalim et al., 2021). In Tahfiz schools, where the primary focus is on Quranic memorization, the integration of academic and practical skills is essential to ensure students are well-prepared for diverse life challenges. The TMUA curriculum exemplifies this integration by combining religious education with academic subjects, thus providing a holistic educational experience (Ambo & Mokhsein, 2019). Additionally, studies on the challenges faced by Tahfiz institutions in implementing vocational skills highlight the need for better curriculum design and resource allocation to effectively integrate these critical life skills (Norsalim et al., 2021).

Studies have shown that when students are exposed to a variety of skills, including those outside their primary area of study, they develop greater self-efficacy, adaptability, and readiness for future challenges. Research in Malaysian educational settings, such as the study on metacognitive skills in secondary schools, demonstrates that integrating a variety of learning approaches improves students' cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Bakar & Ismail, 2020). Furthermore, vocational and technical education studies emphasize the importance of skill diversity in enhancing students' employability and ability to adapt to different job markets (Aziz et al., 2020). For instance, programs that incorporate physical activities like sports alongside academic subjects have been found to improve students' cognitive abilities and physical health simultaneously. In Malaysia, the co-curricular activities embedded within the education system are designed to cultivate these dual benefits, as evidenced by studies on the effectiveness of sports and physical education in improving students' overall development (Shaharanee et al., 2021). Additionally, integrated models of learning, which include both physical and cognitive activities, have been shown to enhance students' academic performance and well-being (Rashed & Tamuri, 2022). Additionally, practical skills like cooking and hair cutting offer students significant opportunities for personal and economic development. These skills are particularly valuable in Tahfiz institutions, where vocational training is increasingly seen to enhance students' future economic prospects. The introduction of vocational skills into the Tahfiz curriculum, despite facing challenges, has been shown to improve students' potential for income generation and self-sufficiency (Norsalim et al., 2021). Furthermore, the focus on skill diversification within the curriculum aligns with broader educational goals to produce well-rounded individuals capable of thriving in various professional environments (Ahmad & Iksan, 2023).

However, the effectiveness of such programs often depends on the quality of instruction and the relevance of the skills taught. Research has shown that teacher readiness and the alignment of curriculum with students' needs are critical factors in the effectiveness of these programs (Suriman & Tahar, 2018). Additionally, studies on curriculum integration emphasize that the selection of skills must be relevant to students' future challenges to ensure the program's overall success (Jamil & Othman, 2023). Tailoring instructional methods to meet the unique needs of students is crucial for improving educational outcomes, especially in subjects where students traditionally face difficulties. In the context of Tahfiz education, personalized teaching methods that align with students' learning styles have been shown to enhance academic performance and retention (Taat et al., 2021). Additionally, the integration of experiential learning with contextual teaching strategies has been found to be particularly effective in improving student engagement and understanding (Raub et al., 2015). This study builds on these findings by evaluating the ASSETS program's effectiveness in improving both academic and practical skills among Tahfiz students, a group that has traditionally been underrepresented in such integrative educational research.

3. Methodology

The Aiding in Sustainable Skills Empowerment & Transfer (ASSETS) program, organized by the Akademi Pengajian Bahasa and the English Language Society of UiTM Cawangan Pulau Pinang, in collaboration with Maahad Riyadhil Quran (MRIQ), aimed to equip participants with both academic and practical skills over a three-day period from May 16 to May 18, 2024. The program's structure was meticulously planned, with activities scheduled from 6:00 AM to 9:00 PM each day, ensuring a comprehensive learning experience for all participants.

The ASSETS program was designed to include a diverse range of activities, focusing on both cognitive and practical skill development. Each day was divided into sessions, beginning with religious and academic activities in the morning, followed by practical skill-building workshops in the afternoon, and concluding with reflective and religious sessions in the evening. For instance, the program began with an "ice-breaking" and team-building session, followed by vocabulary games, sports activities such as frisbee, and skill transfer sessions in culinary arts, barbering, and physiotherapy. Each activity was carefully timed, with most sessions lasting between one to two hours, ensuring participants had sufficient time to engage deeply with the content while maintaining a dynamic and varied schedule.

To evaluate the program's effectiveness, a pre- and post-program survey methodology was employed. Before the start of the program, participants were given surveys to assess their initial skill levels, knowledge, and attitudes towards the subjects covered in the workshops. This pre-program survey served as a baseline to gauge the participants' starting points.

Following the completion of the ASSETS program, participants were asked to complete a post-program survey. This survey mirrored the pre-program survey in content but aimed to measure the participants' improvements and changes in perception as a result of the activities. The comparison of pre- and post-program responses provided valuable data on the impact of the ASSETS program, allowing organizers to assess the effectiveness of the various workshops and activities. This approach ensured that the program's outcomes could be quantitatively measured, offering insights into areas of success and those requiring further enhancement.

In total, there were 21 male Tahfiz students aged 9 to 17 years old who participated in the program. The program covered both academic subjects (English and Mathematics) and practical skills (Frisbee, hair cutting, ice cream making, and body massage). The study used a quantitative approach to assess changes in skill levels. Participants' skills were evaluated before (pre-program) and after (post-program) the completion of the ASSETS program. Data was collected through assessments and skill tests administered at both stages, with scores recorded for each skill area. The results were analyzed using statistical methods to determine the level of improvement across different skill sets. The analysis focused on the percentage of participants who showed improvement in each skill, providing insights into the program's effectiveness and areas that may require further enhancement.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the individual evaluation results post-program. The overall analysis of the data shows that the ASSETS program was effective in enhancing a wide range of skills among participants. Specifically:

- English Skills: Improvement was observed in 76.2% of the participants.
- Mathematics Skills: Improvement was observed in 57.1% of the participants.
- Frisbee Skills: Improvement was observed in 71.4% of the participants.

- Hair Cutting Skills: Improvement was observed in 71.4% of the participants.
- Ice Cream Making Skills: Improvement was observed in 61.9% of the participants.
- Body Massage Skills: Improvement was observed in 52.4% of the participants.

Table 1
Profile of Participants

			Improvement Post-Program			
Participant (Age)	**Engilsh**	***Mathametics***	***Frisbee***	***Hair Cutting***	***Ice Creaming Making***	***Body Massage***
Male A (12)	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Male B (16)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Male C (15)	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male D (15)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male E (13)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	no
Male F (14)	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Male G (15)	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Male H (9)	No	No	Yes	No	No	no
Male I (13)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male J (10)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Male K (13)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	no
Male L (15)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male M (10)	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Male N (16)	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Male O (13)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Male P (13)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male Q (12)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

Male R (12)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Male S (17)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Male T (16)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Male U (15)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Out of the 21 participants, 17 (81%) expressed an interest in improving their English skills. The post-program results indicated that 16 participants showed improvement in their English skills, with their skill levels increasing by one point. Notably, four participants did not show any improvement, indicating a need for further support in this area.

A high level of interest was also seen in improving Mathematical skills, with 90.5% (19 participants) indicating a desire to enhance their abilities. Post-program evaluations showed that 12 participants improved their Mathematics skills, while 9 participants remained at the same skill level as before the program. This mixed outcome suggests that while the program was effective for some, others may need more targeted or intensive interventions to see improvement.

The interest in Frisbee was substantial, with 95.2% (20 participants) wanting to improve in this area. The data showed that 15 participants improved their Frisbee skills, often moving from a pre-score of 2 or 3 to a post-score of 3 or 4. The improvement in Frisbee skills suggests that the program effectively engaged participants in this physical activity.

Hair cutting skills were of interest to 76.2% (16 participants). Post-program evaluations showed that 15 participants improved, with most moving from a lower skill level of 1 or 2 to higher levels. This significant improvement indicates that the practical, hands-on nature of the hair cutting sessions was beneficial for most participants.

The data reveals that 95.2% of the participants were interested in improving their ice cream making skills. Post-program results indicated that 13 participants improved their skills, with most moving from pre-scores of 2 or 3 to post-scores of 4 or 5. This strong improvement underscores the success of the program in teaching practical culinary skills.

Similarly, 81% of participants expressed an interest in learning body massage skills. The post-program data showed that 11 participants improved, typically advancing from pre-scores of 2 or 3 to post-scores of 3 or 4. While some participants did not show improvement, the majority benefited from the program's focus on this skill.

The data indicates that most participants experienced skill growth, particularly in hands-on, practical areas like hair cutting and ice cream making. However, the varying levels of improvement in academic skills like English and Mathematics suggest that these areas may require more tailored instructional approaches.

5. Discussion

The evaluation of the ASSETS 2024 program provides insightful data on the skill enhancements achieved by the participating Tahfiz students. Evaluating educational programs like ASSETS 2024 is essential for understanding their impact on student skill development. According to Suriman and Tahar (2018), the readiness of teachers to deliver skill-based education plays a

critical role in the success of these programs. Their study highlighted the need for proper teacher training and curriculum alignment to enhance the effectiveness of skill development initiatives. Furthermore, Bakar and Ismail (2020) emphasized the importance of metacognitive skills in student achievement, suggesting that programs focusing on a broad range of skills, like ASSETS, can significantly contribute to students' overall development. The findings indicate that while there was notable improvement across various skill areas, the degree of success varied between academic and practical skills. The variation in success across different skill areas is not uncommon in educational programs. Fuad et al. (2020) discussed the challenges faced in implementing dual-language programs in Mathematics and Science, noting that student outcomes can vary significantly depending on the subject matter and the instructional methods used. Similarly, Chandran et al. (2023) highlighted the critical role of teacher knowledge and pedagogical skills in fostering higher-order thinking, which directly impacts the effectiveness of teaching various academic skills.

Impact on academic skills

The program's impact on academic skills, particularly in English and Mathematics, was mixed. While 76.2% of participants showed improvement in English, only 57.1% saw progress in Mathematics. Mixed results in academic skill development, particularly in subjects like English and Mathematics, are often attributed to the differing challenges these subjects present. Fuad et al. (2020) found that students often struggle with the language used in Mathematics and Science, which can hinder their overall performance. Additionally, Rasid et al. (2020) reported that effective instructional practices are crucial in STEM education, indicating that tailored approaches are necessary to address the unique challenges in each academic area. The discrepancy in improvement between English and Mathematics suggests that different strategies may be required to teach these subjects effectively. Bakar and Ismail (2020) emphasized the importance of metacognitive regulation skills in improving Mathematics achievement, highlighting the need for methods that enhance students' cognitive engagement in the subject. Meanwhile, Karuppannan et al. (2021) discussed the specific challenges in teaching English, particularly in special education contexts, underscoring the need for differentiated teaching strategies. The need for adjustments in teaching methods, particularly in Mathematics, is supported by research indicating that instructional strategies must be tailored to address student difficulties. Rasid et al. (2020) found that factors such as lesson planning, classroom culture, and task implementation are critical in enhancing the effectiveness of Mathematics instruction. Similarly, Chandran et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of fostering higher order thinking skills in Mathematics, suggesting that a more nuanced approach to content delivery could improve student outcomes. The data highlights the importance of individualized learning strategies in subjects that students traditionally find challenging, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that can address specific learning gaps. Fuad et al. (2020) discussed the role of personalized teaching methods in improving student engagement and understanding in Mathematics and Science. Additionally, Chandran et al. (2023) emphasized that teachers' knowledge and pedagogical skills significantly influence the effectiveness of interventions designed to enhance learning outcomes.

Impact on practical skills

In contrast, the program was highly effective in enhancing practical skills. The success of the ASSETS program in enhancing practical skills aligns with the broader literature on experiential and hands-on learning. Suriman and Tahar (2018) found that practical skill development is most effective when teachers are well-prepared and when the curriculum is designed to provide ample hands-on learning opportunities. Similarly, Bakar and Ismail (2020) emphasized the importance of integrating practical applications into the curriculum to enhance student engagement and skill

acquisition. Most participants showed significant improvement in areas such as Frisbee (71.4%), hair cutting (71.4%), and ice cream making (61.9%). The significant improvement in practical skills reflects the effectiveness of experiential learning methods. Suriman and Tahar (2018) highlighted the importance of practical skill training in enhancing students' competencies and self-efficacy. Additionally, Bakar and Ismail (2020) noted that integrating practical activities into the curriculum helps students apply theoretical knowledge, leading to better overall outcomes. These findings underscore the value of hands-on, interactive learning experiences that engage students and foster skill development in a more applied, experiential context. Suriman and Tahar (2018) emphasized that experiential learning, which involves active student participation, is particularly effective in fostering practical skills. Bakar and Ismail (2020) also found that hands-on activities enhance metacognitive regulation, which is essential for deep learning and skill mastery.

The success in practical skills indicates that the ASSETS program's structure, which balances academic learning with practical skill acquisition, is particularly well-suited to the needs of Tahfiz students. This balanced structure, integrating both academic and practical skills, aligns with findings from Fuad et al. (2020), who emphasize the importance of blending theoretical and practical learning for a more comprehensive educational experience. This approach is particularly effective in specialized educational settings like Tahfiz schools, where the curriculum often prioritizes religious studies over secular subjects. The study by Bakar and Ismail (2020) further supports this by showing that when students engage in practical activities alongside academic learning, their overall cognitive engagement and skill development improve significantly.

However, the varying levels of improvement across different skills suggest that while the program is effective, there is room for refinement. According to Chandran et al. (2023), the success of educational programs often hinges on the continuous adaptation of teaching methods to meet the evolving needs of students. Additionally, Fuad et al. (2020) highlight that instructional strategies must be regularly assessed and refined to ensure they remain effective across different skill areas. For instance, the relatively lower improvement rates in academic subjects like Mathematics highlight the need for ongoing support and perhaps more innovative teaching methods. Rasid et al. (2020) discuss the importance of integrating effective instructional practices in STEM education, suggesting that a focus on classroom culture, task implementation, and lesson planning could enhance student outcomes in Mathematics. Similarly, Chandran et al. (2023) emphasize the need for teaching strategies that promote higher-order thinking, which could help address the challenges students face in subjects like Mathematics. Additionally, while the practical skills training was successful, continuous assessment and adaptation are crucial for maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of practical skills training. Suriman and Tahar (2018) highlight the importance of ongoing evaluation in vocational training programs to ensure that the skills taught align with current industry needs and student career aspirations. Moreover, Bakar and Ismail (2020) suggest that integrating feedback mechanisms into the curriculum can help educators identify areas for improvement and make necessary adjustments to enhance the overall effectiveness of the training.

6. Conclusion

The ASSETS 2024 program has shown to be a valuable initiative in enhancing both academic and practical skills among Tahfiz students, contributing to their holistic development. The findings from this study demonstrate significant improvements in practical skills such as hair cutting, ice cream making, and sports, indicating the effectiveness of hands-on learning approaches in these areas. However, the results also revealed mixed outcomes in academic skills, particularly in Mathematics, where the improvements were less pronounced. This suggests that while the program is successful in engaging students in practical skill development, the academic

components may require further refinement to better meet the educational needs of Tahfiz students.

First, the discrepancy in improvement rates between English and Mathematics suggests that the program's teaching methods may not be equally effective across all subjects. This gap highlights the need for more tailored instructional strategies that address the specific challenges students face in different academic areas (Fuad et al., 2020). Second, the study provides valuable insights into the immediate impact of the ASSETS program; however, it lacks longitudinal data that could shed light on the long-term retention of skills and knowledge gained during the program. Future studies should consider tracking participants over a more extended period to assess the sustainability of the skills acquired. Third, the study was conducted with a relatively small and homogeneous group of Tahfiz students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the study to include a larger and more diverse sample could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the program's effectiveness.

Future research should focus on developing and testing differentiated instructional strategies that cater to the diverse academic needs of Tahfiz students, particularly in challenging subjects like Mathematics. Incorporating personalized learning plans and employing innovative teaching methods could enhance academic outcomes (Rasid et al., 2020). Next, to better understand the long-term impact of the ASSETS program, future studies should incorporate longitudinal tracking of participants. This would help evaluate the retention of both academic and practical skills over time and identify any areas that may require reinforcement (Suriman & Tahar, 2018). Finally, while the current study focused on a select few practical skills, future research could explore the inclusion of additional skills that are relevant to the students' future careers. This could involve partnerships with industry professionals to ensure that the skills taught are up-to-date and aligned with market demands (Norsalim et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the ASSETS 2024 program has made significant strides in supporting the holistic development of Tahfiz students. By addressing the identified gaps and implementing the recommended strategies, future iterations of the program can further enhance its impact, ensuring that students are well-prepared for both academic and practical challenges.

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