

Ruqyah Syariyyah and the Emotional Regulation of Children with Autism

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Abstract

One in a hundred children in Malaysia are diagnosed with autism and their numbers are increasing. In general, autism refers to the imbalance that occurs in the brain and nervous system resulting in impaired language, behaviour and social interactions. Usually, autistic children require clinical treatment. This study explores the alternative treatment modalities, such as the practice of reading ruqyah syariyyah to autistic children based on specific procedures involving self-reading or being read to. The objectives of this study were to identify the emotional and behavioural issues faced by autistic children, to understand the extent of the practice and implementation of ruqyah syariyyah reading exercises, the challenges faced in conducting this treatment, and the impact of ruqyah reading in regulating the emotions and behaviour of such children. This case study is based on interviews with five teachers and observations of four students with autism. Two students each were identified in the low and high functioning categories. The study was conducted at the Quran Education Center for Children with Special Needs (Faqeh Foundation). The study found that the practice of reading ruqyah syariyyah using certain modalities helps children with autism in regulating their emotions and thus their behaviour. Accordingly, the alternative treatment which involves the use of ruqyah syariyyah reading practices for children with autism is highly recommended.

Keywords: Alternative treatment, Autism, Ruqyah Syariyyah, Emotional regulation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), or autism, is a pervasive developmental ailment caused by neurological imbalances which affect the brain's functioning and nervous systems. Three common symptoms normally associated with ASD children are the inability to interact socially, inability to speak and communicate and the inability to regulate behaviour. In terms of social interactions, the disability is exhibited in lack of eye contact and the excessive use of facial expressions. Language and communication disabilities are manifested in speaking slowly and in frequently repeating words termed 'echolalia'. In addition, another clear feature of ASD children is their repetitive behaviour and limited interest, such as frequent playing with their hands or fingers (Cook et al., 2015).

The word spectrum refers to various manifestations of discomfort such as levels of incapability, developmental stage, and chronological age. Autism can develop as early as 12 months or even earlier in cases of extreme delays in developmental stages, or later than 24 months if the symptoms displayed are not significant. It's initial indications are reflected in delays in early development or the loss of particular social and language skills that ultimately affect an individual's social skills and ability to communicate (Cook et al., 2015).

The characteristics exhibited in ASD become more apparent in early childhood and can be seen in some cases in a lack of interest in social interactions in the first year of life (Siti Marziah & Nor Shahirah 2018). In addition, the onset of ASD often involves a delay in language development and is often associated with a lack of social interest or exceptional social interaction, odd game activities and unusual communication patterns. In the second year, odd and repetitive behaviours and abnormal playing actions become more apparent (Siti Marziah & Nor Shahirah 2018). Gal et al.

(2009) categorised autistic children as those with High Functioning Autism (HFA) and Low Functioning Autism (LFA) based on criteria such as intelligence quotient, communication ability (verbal or non-verbal), and degree of self-reliance.

In general, studies on ruqyah syariyyah have mainly been conducted in the context of physical ailment therapy (Mulyadi et al. 2019; Ismail 2019), and spiritual (Hamroyanah 2019; Ismail 2019), mental (Md. Sa'ad et al. 2017) and supernatural disturbances (Hasanah, 2019; Zakiah 2019). Although most studies on ruqyah syariyyah are related to the treatment of psychological disorders (Mohamad & Othman 2017; Abdullah 2019; Jayanti et al. 2019; Hofie 2019), researchers in this study have yet to find any involving autistic persons. As such, this study is focused to determine the effectiveness of ruqyah syariyyah practices in regulating the emotions and behaviour of children with autism.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study seeks to address the following objectives:

1. Identify the emotional and behavioural issues faced by children with autism;
2. Determine the extent of implementation of reading verses of the ruqyah syariyyah;
3. Challenges encountered in implementing the treatment; and
4. Impact of reading ruqyah on regulating the emotions and behaviour of children with autism.

3. ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON MEDICINE

Informations and evidences in Islam relating to the field of medicine are abundantly available in the Quran and hadiths. Allah SWT explains that the verses of the Quran are an antidote to believers:

“And we gradually bring down from the Quran the sacred verses that serve as a remedy and mercy for those who believe in Him; and instead the Quran does not add to the wrongdoers (because of their disobedience) except in loss.”

(Quran. Al-Isra’: 82)

Allah SWT further says:

“Say (O Muhammad) the Quran is a light and a cure for those who believe, and for unbelievers, (the Quran) is a disease that closes their ears (not a cure); and it is also the darkness that befalls them (not the light that shines).”

(Quran. Al-Fussilat: 44)

In addition, there are also hadiths that reinforce the importance of medicine in Islam. Among others, the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said:

“You have to treat with two things that is the al-Quran and honey”.

(Hadith narrated by al-Hakim: no. 7436)

Abu Hurairah RA also noted:

“There is no disease that Allah has created, except that He also has created its antidote.”

(Hadith narrated by al-Bukhari: no. 5678)

4. RUQYAH SYARIYYAH AS A METHOD OF TREATMENT

Ruqyah syariyyah is known as treatment based on ilahiyyah that is synonymous with Malay culture relating to magic spells. It does not connote the negative aspects of witchcraft or spells that involve elements of association with Allah or seeking the assistance of other beings. In fact, ruqyah syariyyah is a compilation of Quranic verses, remembrance and prayers used as a medical means to treat certain disorders in accordance with the essence of the verses being read (Ahmad Adnan 2013). The ruqyah syariyyah is based on the hadith of the Prophet (SAW) that:

“There is no harm in ruqyah as long as it does not contain any elements of association.”
(Hadith narrated by Muslim: no. 5862)

There are several scholarly views relating to the ruqyah syariyyah. Imam Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani said that Muslim scholars agree that the spell or ruqyah is fulfilled if it satisfies these three conditions:

1. Uses kalamullah or His names and attributes;
2. Uses Arabic or another language whichever can be understood;
3. It must be believed that the spell does not have any effect by itself, but is effective only because Allah SWT allows it.

(Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, 1970)

5. REGULATING THE BEHAVIOUR AND EMOTIONS OF AUTISTIC CHILDREN

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is associated with enhanced emotional responses and poor emotional control (Mazefsky et al. 2013). Emotional regulation is generally defined as the automatic or intentional modification of a person’s emotional state that promotes the adoption of adaptive or goal-directed behaviour (Thompson 1994).

Individuals with ASD are unable to employ adaptive emotional regulation strategies and, instead, respond aggressively to emotional stimuli with tantrums, aggression, or self-injury (Sofronoff et al. 2007). Jahromi, Bryce, and Swanson (2012) state that children and adolescents with ASD apply adaptive emotion regulation strategies such as goal-directed behaviour or seek social support less frequently or as effectively as youths. Therefore, it is important to assist children with ASD to manage their emotions and behaviours by using the ruqyah syariyyah approach as a therapy method.

6. THE SYARIYYAH RUQYAH EXPERIENCE AS A METHOD OF THERAPY

The Faqeh Foundation is an educational institution for special-needs children that specializes in the study of Quranic sciences involving children with autism, have Down Syndrome, low function, and hyperactive. The Foundation in collaboration with the Centre for Quranic Research (CQR), University of Malaya and Faculty of Quran and Sunnah Studies (FPQS), University of Islamic Sciences Malaysia have undertaken a pilot project in developing the QurANIS Curriculum, an innovative Quranic education and worship programme for special children (QurANIS Curriculum 2017). The QurANIS curriculum comprises four basic components: memorization, recitation of the Quran, enrichment through worship therapy, and natural therapy.

The ruqyah syariyyah approach is one of the ways of regulating emotions and behaviours related to ASD. This Ruqyah is an antidote derived from the holy verses of the Quran and the Holy Prophet’s hadiths. The reading of the ruqyah is done before the commencement of teaching and

learning sessions. This is important to stabilize the emotions of the special children and to facilitate easier teaching and learning sessions.

7. METHODOLOGY

This research employed the case study approach comprising interviews with five teachers and observations of four students with autism. Two students each were identified as low functioning and high functioning, respectively. The study was conducted at the Faqeh Foundation, Quran Education Center for Children with Special Needs.

Partially structured interviews were conducted with all informants as to obtain the necessary information aimed at understanding their perspectives and gauging their experiences at the same time. Interviews with the five teachers focused on their perspectives on their use of ruqyah syariyyah reading for the autistic students. Interviews were transcribed and observations were made during the reading process to assess the implementation of the practice.

The interview findings were examined using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis involves searching the entire set of data to find patterns of recurring meanings or trends. It focuses on identifiable themes from the results of interviews that are based on open-ended questions.

8. STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are related to the emotions and behaviours of autistic children, the implementation of ruqyah shariyyah readings, challenges faced by teachers, and the impact of ruqyah shariyyah reading on the emotions and behaviours of the children.

8.1 Behaviour and Emotions of the Autistic Children

Studies show that children with autism experience various emotional issues, such as unstable emotions. Danielle (2012) explains that individuals with autism may experience inappropriate emotional reactions. For example, children with autism sometimes express their anger at one point, sadness at other times, as well as occasionally experience a sense of uncontrollable happiness. Study participants PK1 and PK5 stated that:

“The emotions expressed depend on the students: at times they are angry, at others they are sad, and there are occasions when they laugh uncontrollably.” (PK1)

“The issue of wanting to laugh when doing work. Emotions of happiness which cannot be controlled.” (PK5)

Children with ASD also have difficulty in controlling their emotions (Meiriawan Sulisty, Abdul Salim Choiri, & Furqan Hidayatulloh, 2017). Some are unable to control their feelings when they are upset or when their needs are not met. PK 2 stated that:

“The emotional problem my students face is that they will strike or damage the nearest object if they are disturbed. In addition, some students will become angry and go into a rage if their wishes are not followed.” (PK2)

Sofronoff et al. (2007) stated that children with ASD are failed to adopt adaptive emotion-regulation strategies and instead respond aggressively to emotional stimuli with tantrums, aggression

or self-injury. In addition, they tend to act aggressively such as biting, hitting, and kicking others or themselves (Dominick et al. 2007). PK 4 concurred, stating:

“The emotional issues faced by autistic children studying here are usually anger or the throwing of tantrums.” (PK4)

PK3’s explanation as mentioned during the interview shows that there are also autistic children who do not understand their emotions or feelings:

“Some students do not understand their own emotions while others may understand their emotions of being sad, happy, scared, angry.” (PK3)

According to Suhaili and Siti Syuhada (2017) autistic children are either antisocial or prefer to be on their own. For example, they play alone and focus too much on one thing they are attracted to such as drinking straws and rubber bands. In fact, they are also easily distracted by other things (Meiriawan Sulistyono et al. 2017). There are some who do not respond to the person talking to them and others who are extremely sensitive to sounds. As explained by PK2:

“Among the behavioural issues that some of my students have is that they will be engrossed in playing with something they like, for example drinking straws and rubber bands. Also, there are students who are unresponsive when spoken to and easily distracted by other sounds or voices when we talk to them.” (PK2)

There are also autistic children who cannot sit still and are always on the move. Ohkouchi (2012) explains that children with autism are unable to sit still, and have difficulty in participating in group activities or in listening to the teachers’ explanations. PK5 stated that children with autism:

“Enjoy running around before completing the designated work and activities. They are easily angered when something they like is confiscated by the teacher.” (PK5)

Studies have found that the behaviour of children with autism can be managed with proper education and discipline. Establishing routines and scheduling activities are strategies for structuring the learning environment for students with ASD (Ontario 2007). The selection and implementation of appropriate intervention strategies and support, progress assessments, and adapting appropriate teaching strategies enable students to acquire targeted skills (Myers & Johnson 2007). PK3 did not face any difficulties as the children were subjected to a set of scheduled routines and activities, stating:

“For me there are no behavioural issues due to their daily routine at the Faqeh which they understand, in addition to being able to follow the Faqeh schedule from when they arrive till it’s time to go home.” (PK3)

For PK4, new student enrollees needed the time and guidance of the teacher to participate in the ruqyah reading activity, saying:

“New students need time to attend ruqyah reading in congregation and need guidance from the teacher.” (PK4)

This finding is supported by Güleç-Aslan et al. (2009) who state that with the right guidance, children with autism can cope without facing many issues. Without proper guidelines, children with autism may develop long-term issues.

They need a degree of firmness from the teachers to discipline them, as noted by PK1:

“Some new students require guidance and the teachers need to be firm or strict so that they can complete the ruqyah reading. Usually the student does not want to sit with the teacher, and will walk around or lie down.” (PK1)

8.2 Implementation of Ruqyah Syariyyah Readings

It was observed that prior to the beginning the ruqyah reading, each autistic child and the teacher would need to perform the ablution. The children will perform the ritual under the guidance of the teachers and then sit in a large circle in front of the teacher. This is when various behaviours and conduct are observable. Some children find it easy to follow the instructions of the teacher while others do not obey and give various excuses for not sitting with the teacher.

Drinking water is provided and placed in the centre of the circle. Before the beginning of the ruqyah reading, the children read the supplication seven times with the teacher presenting the verses one at a time. Some of the children would need to be held closely by the teacher to keep them in their seats. The understanding, patience and composure of the teacher during the ruqyah syariyyah reading process helps to some extent in managing the children’s conditions.

After the ruqyah reading, the children will recite the invocation. Then each child will be given a drink of water that has been blessed with the readings of the ruqyah syariyyah. The ruqyah reading is done regularly in the morning and evening.

8.3 Challenges Faced in the Implementation of Such Treatment

Studies show that among the challenges faced by teachers is the need for physical strength to control the behaviour of the children especially those who are new and not familiar with ruqyah syariyyah reading activities. As PK1 explained:

“Teachers are in a constant “power struggle” especially with new students who are not used to the ruqyah routine.” (PK1)

The issue of autistic children who are unable to sit still is a challenge for teachers in managing them and the classroom. PK2 and PK5 explained:

“Among the challenges faced by the teachers during the implementation of the ruqyah is the difficulty in making the students remain seated in a circle during the ruqyah reading session.” (PK2)

“Pupils do not remain seated as they prefer to run around or are extremely playful.” (PK5)

The behaviour of autistic children who find it difficult to follow instructions as described by PK3 is also a challenge for the teachers:

“Some students are eager to drink the water even before the ruqyah reading session is over. Others refuse to drink the water and need a little firm encouragement to do so.” (PK3)

8.4 The Impact of Ruqyah Reading in Regulating the Emotions and Behaviour of Autistic Children

Studies show that the reading of ruqyah syariyyah is helpful in calming children with autism as well as in successfully controlling their emotions. The findings of this study are in line with Mohd Syukri

et al. (2018) who stated that the elements of Islamic psychotherapy have spiritual value that contributes to higher motivation and positively affect such children. This is shared by all those five teachers. For example, PK3 stated that:

“They are calmer and can control their emotions better. There are also students who, when told to make supplications/salutations, become less angry and do not hurt themselves and others.” (PK3)

In addition, all teachers agreed that regular reading of the ruqyah syariyyah would also help autistic children to be more focused and obedient, and to respond more positively. According to PK1:

“One of the effects of reading ruqyah on my students’ behaviour is that they become more focused and attentive during the reading session. In addition, students listen better to the teacher’s instructions and respond well to them. The reading of the sacred words of the ruqyah can also help to discipline the children and make them more respectful.” (PK2)

As with normal children, Islamic psychotherapy approaches such as prayer and the remembrance of Allah have a positive impact on the development of autistic children (Mohd Syukri et al. 2018). This is seen in their ability to show respect to others, especially to their teachers. As stated by PK5:

“Students become calmer, are more respectful of teachers, and can follow instructions.” (PK5)

9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ruqyah syariyyah approach is a therapeutic method that can be used to regulate the emotions and behaviours of children with ASD. It can help to reduce emotional instability and manage their behaviour effectively. In taking the essence of the Quran, where verse 82 of Surah al-Isra states “that Quranic verses are an antidote for believers”, hence, applying them for the purpose of ruqyah syariyyah is one of the alternative treatments that can be used to help children with autism. As such, parents and teachers should pay special attention in shaping autistic children through worshipping and emphasizing on moral learning despite all the difficulties and challenges involved in guiding them.

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