

## **CHAPTER 6:**

# **COMPARISON OF TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE AIMS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND OF LEARNING ACTIVITIES ENCOUNTERED IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CLASSES**

### **6.1. INTRODUCTION**

There was a certain overlap between the questions asked in the teacher questionnaire and in the student questionnaire. This overlap applied to two main areas of the enquiry: perceptions concerning the aims of religious education, and information relating to the nature of the teaching and learning activities used in religious education classes. These two main areas of inquiry were rather similar and covered the common ground among the teachers and students. Teachers' and students' views on these aspects have already been reported in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively, but no comparison between them was made there. Therefore, it is now appropriate to examine to what extent the views of the teachers and students, about the aims of religious education programmes and the teaching and learning activities used in them, are similar.

### **6.2. CHOICE OF ITEMS FOR COMPARING TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS.**

If meaningful comparisons of teachers' and students' responses to particular rating items are to be made, two conditions have to be fulfilled:

- i. The rating items themselves have to be thematically similar, that is, they have to focus on the same aspect.

- ii. The ratings asked for should be made on the same scale, or on scales for which comparability of responses can be established.

For example, in relation to the first point, one would argue that, if in one questionnaire the importance of particular aims is rated, then other questionnaires should ideally ask for the same quality to be rated.

As far as the second requirement is concerned, it would be most readily fulfilled if the items to be compared had to be rated using identical rating scales. However, it is sometimes possible for responses on non-identical scales to be compared, provided that one of the scales can be 'translated' into another. An example of this would be the conversion of responses on a 5-point scale into responses on a 3-point scale, by combining certain response categories on the former.

To explore whether a comparison is possible between the teachers' and students' perceptions, according to these conditions, it is useful to look first at items concerning the aims of religious education and, thereafter, at those relating to the learning experiences and activities.

### **6.2.1. SELECTION OF ITEMS RELATING TO THE AIMS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

For the comparison of teachers' and students' views concerning the aims of religious education, two subsets of items could be identified. The first comprised thematically similar items selected from Section 1 of the teacher questionnaire and Section 2 of the student questionnaire. All these items called for their 'importance' to be rated, on a five-point Likert-type scale. Thus, for this subset, both conditions stated above are

satisfactorily fulfilled. These items are listed in Table 6.1 of the results section in this chapter.

The second subset consisted of thematically similar items drawn from Section 1 of the teacher questionnaire and Section 1 of the student questionnaire. However, the quality to be rated in the case of these items was not identical, in that the teachers had been asked to provide an ‘importance’ rating of the items, whilst students had rated their ‘interest’ in them. Arguably however, students’ interest ratings reflect the degree of importance that was attached, and it would not have made any more sense to ask the students what they thought to be important for a religious education course, since their experience and knowledge base is more limited than that of the teachers. For this reason, it was decided to include the items in the comparability study, but to evaluate them separately from those for which both comparability conditions were unquestionably fulfilled. The items in the second subset are identified on Table 6.2 of the results section in this chapter.

### **6.2.2. SELECTION OF ITEMS RELATING TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

The selection of items for the ‘Teaching and Learning Activities’ area presented no problems. Items for comparison were selected on the basis of a strict application of the two conditions stated above. Altogether seven item pairs were chosen. These are identified in Table 6.3 of the results section in this chapter.

In the original formulation of the rating items, it was not thought to be appropriate to use strictly identical wording for items intended for the teacher questionnaire and the student questionnaire, respectively, and slightly different phrases were used in them. Items in the student questionnaire were usually written in a simpler language to make

them readily understandable. Also, education terms which were used in the teacher questionnaire, were avoided. However, these differences were such that they did not affect the thematic equivalence of the items concerned: the basic ideas and topics contained in them were the same.

### **6.3. STATISTICAL APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION OF ITEM COMPARABILITY**

The raw data obtained for the two populations, that is, teachers and students, from the rating of the questionnaire items are distributions of responses to the various scale points. The essential task in this comparability study was to establish whether the distributions of responses obtained from teachers and students to equivalent items were similar or different. Although there are numerous examples in the literature where comparabilities have been evaluated on the basis of mean ratings obtained for different populations (using t-tests, for example), this approach is allowable only if the distributions of ratings are close to 'normal', which means that they appear in the usual 'bell-shaped' form. In the present case, this criterion clearly did not apply, as is evident from the response distributions reported in Chapters 4 and 5. Consequently, a non-parametric (that is, distribution-free) approach to the evaluation had to be taken.

The approach chosen was to examine the equivalence of the response distributions for teachers and students by means of simple chi-square testing. Since all the results to be used in the comparability study could be presented in the form of 5 x 2 contingency tables (five rating levels and two populations), a program was written for the calculation of chi-square values for 5 x 2 contingency data, and this was applied to the data sets for the various item pairs included in the comparison. Tables 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 in the results section of this chapter list the various chi-squares calculated.

### 6.3.1. INTERPRETATION OF CHI-SQUARE VALUE

The degree to which the ratings of teachers and students are different or similar in the statistical sense may be inferred from the magnitude of the chi-square values. Large chi-square values point to a considerable difference between the two populations, whilst small chi-square values point to the response distributions being similar.

In order to evaluate the statistical significance of chi-square values, it is customary to refer to 'critical' probabilities (or p-values) which indicate how likely it is that a particular difference between two populations might simply have been the result of fortuitous sampling, rather than constituting a genuine difference. In the present case, for a 5 x 2 contingency table (for which the number of degrees of freedom is 4), chi-square values for different probabilities are:

9.49, for  $p = 0.05$  (5 % level);

13.28, for  $p = 0.01$  (1 % level);

18.47, for  $p = 0.001$  (0.1 % level).

If the calculated test statistic exceeds the critical value of chi-square distribution, then the difference between the response distributions on a given item is statistically significant, at the probability level indicated by the p-value corresponding to the chi-square value (Wannacott, 1990); (Lucey, 1985).

As will be seen, practically all the chi-square values obtained from the comparability study of the items selected were greater than 18.5. Consequently, in all instances, the response distributions of teachers and students were genuinely different. However, it has to be said that the nature of the differences can not be inferred from the chi-square

values, but has to be deduced in each instance by inspection of the response distributions themselves. This is the approach that has been used here.

## **6.4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As was stated at the beginning of this chapter, the comparison of teachers' and students' perceptions covered two areas: the aims of religious education and the learning methods and activities used in religious education instruction. Accordingly, this section is divided into two parts, dealing separately with these two areas.

### **6.4.1. COMPARISON OF TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE AIMS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

As already indicated above, the comparison of teachers' and students' views concerning the aims and objectives of religious education was made on the basis of two sets of items. The first of these sets comprised items in which the qualities to be rated were identical: all these items involved the rating of the importance of particular possible outcomes of religious education.

The second set consisted of items which, although thematically equivalent, asked for slightly different qualities to be rated: teachers' ratings related to the importance which they attached to the particular aspects identified in the items, whilst students rated the items in terms of their interest in them.

Because of the slight differences between the two sets of items, the results relating to them are presented and discussed in separate subsections.

#### 6.4.1.1. Comparison of Teachers' and Students' Responses to Items Asking for the Importance of Aims to be Rated

Four items were selected for the comparability evaluation. These are shown in Table 6.1 which also presents the percentised response distributions of teachers and students, together with the associated chi-square values. The questionnaire references indicate the origin of the responses: the letter 'T' refers to teachers' responses; the letter 'P' denotes responses obtained from the students. The items are arranged in the order of decreasing chi-square values.

**Table 6.1: Comparison of Responses to 'Aims of Religious Education' Items Rated by Teachers and Students for Their Importance**

Questionnaire references	Item descriptor	Response frequency (per cent)					Chi-square value
		Very high	High	Moderate	Low	None	
T1.10 P2.3	Instilment of a commitment to the laws of Islam.	94.0 49.3	6.0 31.4	0.0 16.8	0.0 1.9	0.0 0.6	206.5
T1.12 P2.12	Development of a basis for the conduct of one's life in accordance with the Islamic faith.	66.2 26.5	27.2 38.1	5.2 26.7	0.8 7.1	0.5 1.5	167.5
T1.8 P2.6	Generation of tolerance towards faiths and religions other than one's own.	31.7 19.7	43.3 24.4	19.0 30.9	3.7 17.6	2.4 7.4	95.8
T1.16 P2.2	Development of the ability to respond to personal crises and life events in the spirit of one's faith.	51.0 33.8	40.6 36.6	7.1 25.0	1.0 3.8	0.3 1.1	66.2

The magnitude of the chi-square values is such that, in all cases, the difference between teachers' and students' ratings is highly significant in the statistical sense. It is also evident from a general inspection of the response distributions that, on average, teachers attach a higher degree of importance to the four aspects covered by the items than do their students.

The two aims/objectives on which teachers and students differ most are those relating to the ‘instilment of a commitment to the laws of Islam’ and the ‘development of a basis for conducting one’s life in accordance with the Islamic faith’.

Both these aims have a strong orientation towards the acceptance by students of the Islamic faith and its rules. Teachers clearly see this to be a major outcome of their religious education work with students. Students’ views about the importance of this aspect are less positive although most still rate them as important.

The remaining two items do not focus directly on the Islamic religion, but are more concerned with personal qualities (‘tolerance towards other faiths’ and ‘ability to respond to personal crises and life events’). Here, the difference between teachers’ and students’ rating patterns narrows somewhat, as the smaller chi-square values indicate. In each case, teachers still regard the issue identified in the item descriptor as more important than their students. However, the general level of importance attributed to these two items is distinctly below that attributed to the Islam-related items.

The general conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing comparisons is that the degree of importance that students attach to particular aims and objectives of religious education falls below that perceived by their teachers. None of the differences observed was ‘extreme’ in the sense that teachers’ and students’ ratings tended towards opposite ends of the importance spectrum. Nevertheless, they can all be regarded as ‘real’ since they were highly significant in statistical terms.



#### 6.4.1.2. Comparison of Teachers' and Students' Responses to Items Rated by Teachers for Their Importance and by Students for Their Interest in Them

Altogether nine rating items concerning the aims of religious education could be allocated to the second set of items for comparison. Table 6.2 identifies these items and gives percentised distributions of teachers' and students' responses. The arrangement of the data in this table is identical to that in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.2: Comparison of Responses to 'Aims of Religious Education' Items Rated by Teachers for Their Importance and by Students for Their Interest in Them**

Questionnaire references	Item descriptor	Response frequency (per cent)					Chi-square value
		Very high	High	Moderate	Low	None	
T1.1 P1.1	Development of knowledge of the Quran and other Islamic laws.	94.8 36.9	5.0 22.7	0.3 30.2	0.0 6.2	0.0 4.0	319.1
T1.11 P1.14	Development of knowledge about the lives and achievements of religious leaders.	90.3 32.0	7.8 31.8	1.8 25.5	0.0 8.0	0.0 2.7	312.8
T1.4 P1.4	Development of an awareness of the influence of religion and religious movements on contemporary society.	64.6 27.5	23.7 30.3	9.5 31.1	1.3 8.0	0.8 3.1	144.9
T1.5 P1.3	Promotion of an understanding of the origins and teachings of other world religions.	24.3 12.9	40.6 17.0	26.4 41.3	6.9 17.0	1.8 11.8	121.3
T1.8 P1.10	Development of tolerance towards, and understanding of, people of other faiths and religions.	31.7 19.5	43.3 23.8	19.0 32.4	3.7 16.6	2.4 7.8	97.7
T1.14 P1.13	Development of knowledge of the work and functions of religious institutions and the people in them.	16.3 43.9	34.9 24.6	31.8 23.1	10.8 5.7	6.3 2.7	81.0
T1.19 P1.9	Instilment of knowledge about the foundations of, and reasons underlying, religious practices and festivals.	26.1 24.8	47.9 33.5	19.7 31.4	4.5 5.7	1.8 4.6	28.5
T1.3 P1.2	Development of an appreciation of the origins and the history of the Islamic religion.	30.1 23.4	43.4 34.3	19.9 33.3	4.0 6.2	2.7 2.8	24.8
T1.6 P1.6	Development of the ability to interpret and appraise life events in religious terms.	26.4 26.5	40.3 28.7	23.6 30.6	6.5 10.9	3.1 3.3	17.4

From their chi-square values, the items in Table 6.2 may be divided into three groups.

These comprise, respectively, items with a chi-square value in excess of 300; items whose chi-square value falls between 80 and 150, and items with a chi-square value below 30. It is for the first group of items that the difference between teachers and students is highest, whereas it is least for the last group.

There are two aims/objectives in the 'chi-square greater than 300' category. Both relate to issues closely linked to the Islamic religion. The first concerns 'the development of knowledge of the Quran and other Islamic laws' and the second deals with 'the lives and achievements of religious leaders'. As the rating distributions for these items clearly indicate, students' interest in these aspects does not reflect the high importance that their teachers attach to them. From the teachers' point of view, the Quran and Islamic laws are considered to be the basic source of Islamic religion. Thus, their view that developing knowledge about the Quran and related matters is an essential task is not surprising. Although the students might endorse this view, their interest in the study of the Quran and Islamic laws is less pronounced.

The same is true for the second item in the 'high chi-square' group. Here again, a large proportion of the teachers thought that it was important to study the life and achievement of religious leaders. Yet, the students appeared less interested in studying this area. A possible explanation for this is that students view knowledge about the lives and achievements of religious leaders to be an aspect of 'history' the relevance of which to the students' personal lives and contemporary society is not appreciated.

For items in the next group, ranging from the 'development of an awareness of the influence of religion and religious movements on contemporary society' to

‘Development of knowledge of the work and functions of religious institutions and the people in them’, the differences between teachers and students are substantial, but less pronounced than for the first two items. The pattern of teachers’ ratings being higher than those of the students applies here also, but there is one notable exception. This concerns ‘the development of knowledge about the work of religious institutions and the people in them’: here students’ interest is evidently greater than the importance teachers attach to it. Compared with other items in the ‘middle chi-square’ group, the item just mentioned (T1.14/P1.13) refers to an aspect of religion that students are likely to view as being relevant, if not to them personally, then certainly to the society in which they live. This may explain the students’ relatively high interest in this particular aspect.

For the remaining three items in Table 6.2, the chi-square values - though statistically significant - are comparatively low. This is a reflection of the similarity in the distribution of teachers’ and students’ responses and the fact that these responses spread over the full range of the rating points. It is evident from this that teachers’ opinion about the importance of the issues expressed in the items (‘Knowledge of the foundations of religious practices’; ‘Appreciation of the origins and history of Islam’; ‘Ability to interpret and appraise life events in religious terms’) is just as divided as is students’ interest in them. Some teachers consider these aspects to be important or very important; other do not. Likewise, some students find them very interesting; others do not.

#### **6.4.1.3. Conclusion**

Both sets of comparisons between teachers’ and students’ responses to rating items which were concerned with the aims and objectives of religious education point almost

uniformly in one direction: students generally regard the various aims and objectives as less important or interesting than corresponds to the importance which their teachers attach to them. In only one out of 13 situations does the reverse apply.

The greatest differences between teachers and students appear to exist in aims which relate directly to the basics of the Islamic religion, for example, knowledge of the Quran and Islamic laws, the commitment to these laws and their use as a basis for one's personal life, and the knowledge about the life and work of religious leaders. A possible explanation for this is that teachers view these aspects to form the backbone of their religion and, hence, attach the highest importance to their transmission to the students. Students, however, judge these (and other items) in terms of their relevance to themselves and their lives, at least to some extent. Where this relevance is not apparent to them, they accord a lower importance or interest rating to an item.

This would also explain why the differences between teachers and students narrow, when aims relating to matters of the personal and/or social relevance of religious education are considered.

There is, of course, an additional factor that has to be borne in mind in the interpretation of the present data. This is that the teachers, as persons with a professional vested interest in religious education, may for this very reason attach greater importance to what they teach than do the recipients of their teaching. After all, it has often been said that every teacher thinks (and would like his students to think) that his subject is the most important in the curriculum.

#### 6.4.2. COMPARISON OF TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE USE OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

From the scrutiny of the questionnaire, seven items could be identified which allowed a direct comparison of teachers' and students' views concerning the use of instructional procedures to be made. Table 6.3 shows the item descriptors and also gives summary information about the comparisons made.

Before commenting on the information in the table, it is worth stressing that the purpose of the comparison was to examine the extent to which teachers' and students' perception of the use of the various instructional procedures coincided or differed. Comments about the actual level of use of these procedures have already been made in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis.

The information given in Table 6.3 is analogous to that in Table 6.1 and 6.2. The prefix 'T' in the questionnaire reference column indicates that the data were derived from the teachers; the prefix 'P' denotes that the data originated from the students.

**Table 6.3: Comparison of Teachers' and Students' Ratings of the Frequency of Use of Different Learning Experiences and Activities in Religious Education Courses**

Questionnaire references	Item descriptor	Response frequency (per cent)					Chi-square value
		Always	Often	Occasionally	Seldom	Never	
T2.7 P3.5	Discussions of controversial issues.	53.2 15.6	30.7 23.7	8.5 37.3	4.5 18.5	3.2 5.0	210.6
T2.6 P3.3	Presentations from outside lecturers.	1.6 8.2	2.9 14.8	26.5 31.2	28.7 27.9	40.2 17.9	90.2
T2.5 P3.4	Visits to places of historical or cultural interest.	0.0 8.4	3.5 11.6	10.8 18.1	31.6 21.7	54.1 40.3	72.9
T2.13 P3.1	Reading aloud of passages from textbooks, during lessons.	39.3 28.9	29.6 31.2	20.3 30.4	3.4 7.2	7.4 2.3	33.9
T2.3 P3.2	Viewing of video-recordings presenting religious matter.	0.5 4.4	3.0 6.5	9.2 16.0	34.0 27.8	53.4 45.3	30.1
T2.11 P3.14	Independent study assignments in relation to religious subject matter.	2.1 10.7	11.8 13.9	29.9 24.2	29.7 24.2	26.5 27.0	28.3
T2.8 P3.11	Study visits to social or welfare organisations, e.g., orphanages, old people's homes, etc.	0.8 4.2	2.4 4.8	11.9 8.8	32.3 23.3	52.6 58.9	22.2

On the basis of the chi-square values, the items divide into three groups: the first comprises an item for which the value is in excess of 200; the second comprises two items with a chi-square value in the 70 to 90 range; the third consists of four items with chi-square values of about 30 or less. The difference between teachers' and students' ratings is, of course, highest for the highest chi-square values.

The item for which the divergence of views between teachers and students is largest concerns the occurrence of 'discussions of controversial issues' in religious education classes. The claim by the large majority of teachers that they use this procedure at least 'often', is clearly not endorsed by their students: in the opinion of the latter, this type of learning activity features distinctly less frequently than the teachers claim.

One can think of at least two possible explanations for this discrepancy. The first is that teachers and students differ in their view about what constitutes a 'controversial issue'. The other possibility is that teachers generally endorse the view that it is, in principle, desirable for controversial issues to be discussed in the context of a religious education programme and that this has coloured their responses to this item. Indeed, the claim by over 50% of the teachers that they always deal with such issues may be taken as supporting the second explanation.

A strong difference in perception is also noted for two further items in Table 6.3, namely, 'presentations from outside lecturers' (that is, persons not directly connected with the school) and 'visits to places of historical/cultural interest'. Interestingly, in both cases, students report a slightly higher level of use of these activities than do their

teachers. A possible reason for this is that students' judgements about the frequency of these procedures may not strictly have been confined to their religious education programmes.

For the remaining four items in Table 6.3, the agreement between teachers and students is reasonably close. This can be inferred not only from the relatively low chi-square values, but also from the similarities of the distributions of the teachers' and students' responses.

With the exception of the first and fourth item, all items in Table 6.3 concern teaching and learning activities that may be described as 'progressive' and which, for the most part, provide a potential link between classroom-based religious education and the outside world. The general conclusion to be drawn from the distribution data is that such learning activities find little application in contemporary religious education programmes in Saudi secondary schools: both teachers and students are agreed upon this. There is clearly a strong case to be made for more attention to be paid by course designers and teachers to the development, adoption and implementation of these pedagogical strategies, in order to render religious education more stimulating and 'relevant' in the students' eyes.

## **6.5. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this chapter was to examine to what extent teachers' and students' views concerning the aims of religious education and the use of different learning activities in religious education programmes were similar. For the comparison, a limited number of items was chosen from the teacher questionnaire and the student

questionnaire, respectively, and response distributions compared by means of chi-square testing.

For all the items examined, the chi-square values obtained pointed to statistically significant differences between teachers' and students' views. However, the differences themselves were markedly different, as could be judged from the actual magnitudes of the chi-square values.

As far as the aims and objectives of religious education are concerned, the following broad conclusions can be reached on the basis of the present data.

- i. Teachers generally attach a higher level of importance to the aims of religious education than do their students. No doubt, this is a reflection of the 'professional' commitment that teachers have to what is essentially their specialist discipline. This is a phenomenon that is far from uncommon among teachers generally: each is convinced of the intrinsic value and importance of 'his' subject. Students, alas, do not always concur with this.
- ii. In situations where particular aims related to the students' personal and social concerns, the differences between teachers' and students' ratings are lowest. This suggests that, where students recognise the relevance of religious education topics to themselves and their personal lives, their interest in them rises close to that of their teachers. There is clearly a lesson to be learned from this by course developers and designers.



As far as the learning and teaching activities in religious education programmes are concerned, the present findings essentially confirm the conclusions already reached in the chapters reporting the results of the teacher and the student questionnaires. These are:

- iii. Traditional teaching methods appear to dominate in religious education programmes and there is little evidence that students become involved in 'progressive' learning strategies to any significant extent. In relation to the coverage of 'controversial issues' in the context of religious education, teachers seem to take a highly over-optimistic view.
- iv. Both teachers' and students' responses confirm that little is done to link religious education with the world outside the school. The use of outside lectures, visits to places of historical/cultural interest or social institutions were very rare indeed, according to both teachers and students. Interestingly, the students gave a slightly more positive verdict concerning the use of these activities than did their teachers.

Both sets of findings, that is, those relating to the aims and objectives of religious education and those concerning the use of teaching/learning methods in religious education courses, point to the need for a substantial rethinking about religious education. Possible directions for this rethinking are explored in the final chapter of this thesis.