

Managing Islamic Education Curriculum in Indonesian Schools: Best Practices and Policy Recommendations

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Abstract:

Despite studies in the realm of Islamic education teaching has been extensively conducted, the application of Islamic education curriculum in Indonesian secondary schools receives scant academic attention from the previous researchers. To fill this void, the present exploratory case study aims to explain practices of Islamic education enacted as a nationally-mandated school subject in secondary schools and to explore to what extent the Indonesian government supports Islamic education teachers to handle this compulsory school subject. Four Islamic education teachers of junior secondary schools volunteered to participate in this research. Data were garnered through classroom observation and in-depth interviews. Framed in thematic analysis, this study reports that the syllabus, lesson plan, learning resources, classroom-based practices, and authentic assessment required thorough concern. In response to this, the government support was needed to promote the best practices, i.e. teacher professional development and provision of sufficient school facilities. To policy authorities in Indonesia, the study recommends facilitating Islamic education teachers with sustainable professional development and redesigning the government-prescribed textbooks to foster teacher creativity in their teaching and learning processes.

Key Words: *Islamic Education, National Curriculum, Secondary Schools, Government Support*

INTRODUCTION

The 2013 Curriculum has been enacted in Indonesia as a result of curriculum reforms since the academic year of 2013. The present national curriculum offers innovations for all dimensions of a curriculum to elevate curriculum ideas, designs, process, and theoretical and practical enactment (Hasan, 2013: 163). This curriculum also endorses Islamic education as a mandatory school subject, including in secondary schools. In this respect, the implementation of Islamic education should concern the practices at curriculum, pedagogical, and assessment domains (Daulay & Tobroni, 2019: 110). To cope with this, the Ministry of Religious Affairs should be engaged in the curriculum development regarding the practices of Islamic education in school settings to reduce the dualism between this ministry and the Ministry of Education and Culture (Mahfud, 2019: 36). It indicates that the reform of the national curriculum should involve all related stakeholders to result in more comprehensive design.

Interestingly, the design of the 2013 Curriculum has attracted a particular view in terms of its best practices, e.g. the lesson plan, learning resources, assessment, and teacher professional development, including in Islamic education subject. Sabri, Kustati, & Sepriyanti (2019: 323) claim that scientific approach, i.e. observing, questioning, collecting

information, associating, and communicating, prescribed in the national curriculum fulfills learning activities of Islamic education subject. In a further vein, authentic assessment employed in the curriculum accommodates real-life practical performance to evaluate students' competencies (Gulikers, Runhaar, & Mulder, 2018: 217).

Continuous professional development programs also stimulate teachers' pedagogical and professional competencies (Prihidayanti, Florentinus, & Kustiono, 2019: 95). Additionally, Islamic education teachers are demanded to incorporate character education integrated in their teaching and learning process. In this respect, building national education character serves to enhance the quality of knowledge, skills, and attitudes as elements of learners' humanity (Fahmy, Bachtiar, Rahim, & Malik, 2015: 852). To support these challenges and prospects of Islamic education, teachers should be nurtured by a wide array of opportunities to hone their competencies in designing the classroom-based practices suited the nationally-mandated curriculum.

Dealing with this paradigm, studies on the realm of Islamic education curriculum have burgeoned to discuss. Prior research by Nuryana (2017) outlined that the milestones of Islamic education in Indonesia's 2013 Curriculum and its future required the government support, e.g. teacher professional development, school facilities, and other curriculum policies. Zahra's (2019) study points in further directions suggesting that the enactment of Islamic education as one of mandatory subjects in the national curriculum covered content, process, and evaluation components to promote character and multicultural education.

Another research conducted by Munastiwi & Marfuah (2019) highlighted the comparison of Islamic education practices in Indonesia and Malaysia. This study reported that both countries employed similar phases of Islamic education curriculum in relation to planning, implementation, and evaluation. This growing body of research has been the prominence to shed light on the pedagogical issues on Islamic education. It implies that the demand of providing appropriate Islamic education in Indonesia has been of great attention among both the domestic and overseas researchers.

However, little empirical research has been conducted to examine practical applications, challenges, and future prospects of Islamic education in Indonesia so as to afford policy recommendations for elevated Islamic education curriculum. To fill this gap, this exploratory case study aims to explain practices of Islamic education enacted as Islamic a nationally-tailored school subject in junior secondary schools and to explore to what extent the Indonesian government supports Islamic education teachers to handle this required school subject.

This two-month exploratory case study was undertaken in two public junior secondary schools in the Central Java Province, Indonesia. The selection of these two schools was due to the consideration that they were the piloting schools in relation to the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum. It depicts that Islamic education as a required subject has been well-managed in these schools. Four Islamic education teachers volunteered to be participants of this study. Concerning research ethics, the teacher participants obtained consent from their school principals.

Data were collected from observations and interviews. Classroom observations were carried out to investigate how the teachers realized the classroom practices that had been previously designed in their lesson plans in terms of Islamic education as a compulsory school subject in the 2013 Curriculum. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were organized with the four teacher participants to obtain in-depth information of their

best practices and lived experiences in relation to teaching Islamic education subject enacted in the national curriculum. The interview data were analyzed employing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia*, and the scripts were translated into English. All the interview data were transcribed, coded, and highlighted as emerging themes leading to discussion of this study. The results of the present study may give empirical insights into practices of Islamic education subject enacted in the 2013 Curriculum and provide recommendations to related policy makers.

DISCUSSION

Practices of Islamic Education Curriculum in Indonesian Secondary Schools

Informed by the interview data, the first theme emerging is practices of Islamic education as a national school subject in Indonesian schools, particularly, junior secondary schools. The sub-themes captured from the interview data analysis portray the application of Islamic education curriculum, i.e. the syllabus, lesson plan, and learning resources, classroom-based practices, and authentic assessment.

Syllabus, Lesson Plan, and Learning Resources

The following teachers' interviews provide more empirical evidence of the syllabus, lesson plan, and learning resources of Islamic education as a national school subject in two Indonesian junior secondary schools.

Teacher Vignette 1

Teachers use nationally-mandated syllabus and textbooks. It enables us to focus on the design of lesson plans. It, however, may restrict the flexibility to create interactive learning activities. I find some difficulties in developing lesson plans based on the national syllabus (Teacher 1, In-depth Interview, 15 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 2

The syllabus has been designed by the government. Teachers need more time to prepare the lesson plan, and it is due to its complicated format that consists of lots of pages (Teacher 2, In-depth Interview, 20 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 3

The syllabus and textbooks have been provided for Islamic education teachers. It boosts me to concentrate on the lesson plan design so as to provide comprehensive learning activities. However, I still encounter problems in following the determined format from the government, especially for assessment section (Teacher 3, In-depth Interview, 23 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 4

Teaching Islamic education in junior secondary schools needs more concern to design lesson plans by regarding the core competence and basic competence stipulated in the mandated syllabus. Both competencies are relatively hard to view by teachers. We are afraid to notice if the learning objectives are not well-achieved. Furthermore, character education is integrated in the teaching and learning process. Accordingly, Islamic education teachers should be knowledgeable about

incorporating moral values in their classroom practices previously evidenced by designing an appropriate lesson plan. (Teacher 4, In-depth Interview, 6 September 2018, Researcher Translation).

The interviews with the teacher participants demonstrate that they were equipped with government-mandated syllabus and textbooks as expressed by Teacher 1 and Teacher 3. In this respect, the Islamic education teachers required to develop their lesson plans situated with the nationally-mandated syllabus creatively as the endeavor of curriculum planning in their teaching and learning process. This confirms what Adolfsson (2018: 428) argues that a subject syllabus and lesson plan represent determined learning objectives, core content, and assessment criteria to guarantee the quality of curriculum planning. Further, it looks inward that curriculum implementation requires program concepts to foster curriculum and teacher management competencies, program objectives, models and techniques, program outline, and program contents (Panichpongsapak, Tesaputa, & Sri-ampai, 2016: 178). In other words, owing the need to design their lesson plans, the Islamic education teachers in the junior secondary schools have executed the nationally-prescribed curriculum.

Classroom-Based Practices

This study also promotes the next emerging theme, i.e. classroom-based practices. The in-depth interview data, three sub-themes emerged: teachers' creativity, appropriate teaching strategies, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. Responding to these sub-themes, the teachers coping with Islamic education subject in junior secondary schools need to possess sufficient pedagogical knowledge of classroom management to facilitate engaging learning activities. The responses from the teacher participants are presented in the following interview results:

Teacher Vignette 1

The 2013 Curriculum promotes scientific approach comprising five-step learning activities, namely: observing, questioning, collecting information, associating, and communicating. This demands Islamic education teachers' creativity in realizing fruitful atmosphere (Teacher 1, In-depth Interview, 15 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 2

A wide array of teaching strategies is essential to have for Islamic education teachers so as to engage students with innovated teaching and learning processes (Teacher 2, In-depth Interview, 20 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 3

Concerning steps of learning activities, i.e. observing, questioning, collecting information, associating, and communicating, Islamic education teachers should promote student-centered approach, provide students with interactive learning media, and facilitate them with a good role in the classroom. It denotes our creativity is crucial to foster, particularly in the 2013 Curriculum (Teacher 3, In-depth Interview, 23 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 4

Islamic education teachers require being well-adapted with information and communication technology (ICT) skills. The skills are pivotal in the current national curriculum (Teacher 4, In-depth Interview, 6 September 2018, Researcher Translation).

Inspired through the interviews with teacher presearch participants, the findings illustrate that the teachers respectively deem the scientific paradigm of Islamic education management in junior secondary schools. It was shown by their pedagogical competence of scientific approach highlighted in the 2013 Curriculum. The approach comprising observing, questioning, collecting information, associating, and communicating is completely needed by the teachers to transfer knowledge, foster beneficial skills, and behave in noble character to their students.

This is consistent with what Yasin & Jani (2013: 14) declare that teaching constitutes the development of students' knowledge, skills and attitudes (moral and spiritual) through the learning process to help they grow into useful individuals in society. It also suggests that various endeavors were attempted by the Islamic education teachers to achieve learning objectives that were crucial to provide their students with meaningful knowledge and learning practices. Accordingly, transformed knowledge and the skills provided to students are very pivotal to meet determined learning objectives as knowledge shapes a series subjects with experience emphasizing various aspects (Brawley, Campbell, Desman, Kolenko, & Moodie, 2013: 55). This empirical evidence showcases that the teachers organizing Islamic education as a compulsory school subject need to receive the pedagogical competence to carry out their teaching and learning process adapting the paradigm of the current national curriculum implementation.

Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment is further concern for Islamic education teachers in junior secondary schools since they should assess cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains emphasized in the 2013 Curriculum. The various forms of assessment allegedly triggered difficulties for the teachers in designing the assessment in their lesson plans. The assessment intends to evaluate students' knowledge, behavior, and skills during the learning process. The following interview data illustrate practices of authentic assessment performed in the present national curriculum.

Teacher Vignette 1

Cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains are embraced in the 2013 Curriculum's assessment. I often encounter several problems in designing the assessment with an appropriate scoring system (Teacher 1, In-depth Interview, 15 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 2

Besides developing the mandated syllabus into well-arranged lesson plans, administering assessment to evaluate affective and psychomotor domains constitutes another problem of teaching Islamic education as a required school subject in the 2013 Curriculum (Teacher 2, In-depth Interview, 20 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 3

In response to the present national curriculum, Islamic education teachers should manage instruments and criteria for student assessment. There is an established minimum achievement criterion to consider so as gaining the learning objectives. Moreover, types of authentic assessment, i.e. performance-based, project-based, and portfolio assessment, demand lots of critical thinking and efforts to implement (Teacher 3, In-depth Interview, 23 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 4

The assessment aspect organized in the 2013 Curriculum demands thorough procedures. Different aspects of assessment, i.e. cognitive, affective, and psychomotor ones, require teachers to design an appropriate scoring system. It shows that sufficient knowledge of the student assessment needs to be fostered through seminars or workshops (Teacher 4, In-depth Interview, 6 September 2018, Researcher Translation).

Informed by the interviews with the recruited teacher participants, this study captures a viewpoint that the authentic assessment managed to students in junior secondary schools received thorough attention. The result reveals that the Islamic education teachers had to be well-equipped with the pedagogical competence of this type of learning assessment. It is due to the fact that the 2013 Curriculum copes with authentic assessment with determined criteria of scoring system for cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects as depicted by Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 4. This is in line with what Al-Basheer, Ashraah, & Alsmadi (2015: 484) mention that authentic assessment engages students with the learning activities emphasizing higher-level thinking skills and self-reflection for their behavior so as to become lifelong learners. Teachers, as a result, should play a role as a designer of authentic assessment to evaluate student performance and behavior (Black & Wiliam, 2018: 15).

Students' affective domain, for example, should be evaluated with appropriate learning assessment to observe their social and religious spirituality. This means that the assessment is employed to provide feedback as a catalyst for students' current and future learning (Hawe & Dixon, 2017: 3). For this reason, Baird, Andrich, Hopfenbeck, & Stobart (2017: 340) assert that a goal-setting activity established in learning assessment gives a large impact on the content and style of learning perceived by students both inside and outside the classroom. Unless teachers manage assignments or tasks demanding meaningful approaches connected to everyday life, authentic assessment tends to be unsupportive ways (Mumm, Karm, & Remmik, 2016: 17).

The empirical finding also illustrates that even though Islamic education has been stipulated as a nationally-mandated school subject, the teachers handling this encountered the problems and challenges in assessing students' learning. This is unmasked by the teachers' responses exposing that providing authentic assessment promoted in the 2013 Curriculum was deemed quite challenging for the Islamic education teachers since they did not possess adequate knowledge of this learning assessment as reported by Teacher 3. It indicates that the teachers perceived the difficulty in organizing the authentic assessment, i.e. performance-based, project-based, and portfolio assessment, with a complicated scoring system respectively. To deal with this, teachers should have the schemata of authentic

assessment emphasizing the form of a performance or product as the outcome of this assessment (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, & Brown, 2014: 207). Authentic assessment, moreover, is projected to yield the promotion of student behavior (James & Casidy, 2018: 11). The teachers' responses show that the problems and challenges should be taken into account by the government regarding the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum, specifically for Islamic education as a required school subject.

The Government Support of the Enactment of Islamic Education Curriculum

The present exploratory case study yields the enactment of Islamic education curriculum requiring the government support as the second emerging theme as a result of the interview data analysis. Interestingly, informed by the interview with teacher participants, two sub-themes emerged in this discussion section, namely: sustainable teacher professional development and the provision of school facilities, to uncover the best practices of the nationally-mandated curriculum on Islamic education in junior secondary schools.

Sustainable Teacher Professional Development

Teacher professional development (TPD) comes to the surface as the first emerging theme from the Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis employed in this study. The results of the interviews with teacher participants are depicted as follows.

Teacher Vignette 1

Not all Islamic education teachers have received such workshops or training in the implementation of Islamic education curriculum in junior secondary schools. Consequently, it is no wonder if there are lots of teachers have not been professionally developed considering the 2013 Curriculum practices on Islamic education subject (Teacher 1, In-depth Interview, 15 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 2

I ever joined professional development training in the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum organized by the school, but I think it did not generate sufficient skills on designing required lesson plans, including the complicated scoring system (Teacher 2, In-depth Interview, 20 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 3

We really need more workshops or professional development training in the 2013 Curriculum application, especially in Islamic education subject. I still find the problems in organizing learning activities, developing the mandated syllabus into a lesson plan, and designing good assessment for affective and psychomotor domains (Teacher 3, In-depth Interview, 23 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 4

Continuous professional development is completely required as knowledge is dynamic. We, Islamic education teachers, should be equipped with the pedagogical competence and technological skills concerning the growth of Islamic education in today's educational reforms. More specifically, the scientific approach endorsed in

the 2013 Curriculum needs to be systematically integrated in teaching and learning process, and it might be well-adapted by providing sustainable professional development, e.g. training and workshops (Teacher 4, In-depth Interview, 6 September 2018, Researcher Translation).

Drawing on the the interview data, the teacher participants responded that they perceived continuous professional development was crucial to give new insights on the 2013 Curriculum enactment, particularly in Islamic education situated in junior secondary schools. It is evidenced by Teacher 1 reporting that not all Islamic education teachers experienced government-organized workshop or training in the 2013 Curriculum implementation, including lesson plan design, nationally-prescribed textbook for teachers, teaching and learning strategies incorporated with scientific approach, and literacy and technology skills. This accepts what Sedova, Sedlacek, & Svaricek (2016: 20) claim that TPD could lead to better changes in classroom interaction as a result of a well-established learning design, including the preparation of syllabus, learning resources, pedagogical activities, and supporting skills.

In a similar layer, Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 voiced the same necessity for receiving workshop or training to elevate their professional development of Islamic education in junior secondary schools. They argued that pedagogical competence and technological skills were pivotal to face the educational paradigms. Teacher 4, likewise, viewed that the scientific approach highlighted in the present national curriculum was well-digested through meaningful professional development programs held not only by the school, but also by the government.

It aligns with what Aelterman et al. (2013: 74) assert that training for teachers is potential to upgrade their classroom-based knowledge and skills and provides them with the space for active and collaborative engagement. Similarly, quality training contributes to positive outcomes for teachers, e.g. knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Gaumer Erickson, Noonan, Brussow, & Supon Carter, 2017: 1). This reality proposes that such training or workshop is inevitably needed by teachers to empower particular knowledge and skills of teaching Islamic education as a mandatory school subject in junior secondary schools.

Provision of School Facilities

Concerning the issue of government support to managing Islamic education curriculum in Indonesian junior secondary schools, the second sub-theme emerged from the interview data is the provision of school facilities.

Teacher Vignette 1

The school that I am teaching has established sufficient learning facilities to support classroom practices. Nevertheless, it can be noticed that there are still lots of schools that have not tackled the lack of support in relation to learning facilities, including in remote areas. This reality may burden teachers to serve teaching and learning activities that have been well-situated in their lesson plans (Teacher 1, In-depth Interview, 15 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 2

School facilities and infrastucture are crucial to succeed the 2013 Curriculum implementation. Supported by sufficient learning facilities, teachers are more

enthusiastic about designing classroom practices that fit scientific approach and character education emphasized in the current curriculum (Teacher 2, In-depth Interview, 20 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 3

Information and communication technology (ICT) skills are highlighted in the enactment of the 2013 Curriculum. The skills are potential to hone in the classroom setting if the government or school provides teachers with adequate learning facilities (Teacher 3, In-depth Interview, 23 August 2018, Researcher Translation).

Teacher Vignette 4

Teachers supported with adequate school facilities and infrastructure tends to perform the pedagogical competence in achieving established learning objectives (Teacher 4, In-depth Interview, 6 September 2018, Researcher Translation).

The evidence based on the teacher interviews reveals a clear practice of the government support in terms of school facilities and infrastructure. More interestingly, Teacher 2 gave a fascinating insight that the provision of sufficient learning facilities led to the success of scientific approach, i.e. observing, questioning, collecting information, associating, and communicating, promoted in the 2013 Curriculum. In addition, providing classroom best practices, achieving learning objectives, and familiarizing with ICT skills in the national curriculum requires the support of adequate school facilities as noticed by Teacher 1, Teacher 3, and Teacher 4. The finding posits that that learning facilities are deemed totally pivotal to support the teachers in their teaching and learning process. This affirms what Murillo & Román (2011: 44) contend that providing well-supported school facilities and infrastructure leads to result in suitable learning experiences. School authorities, therefore, should take into account of managing established learning facilities, including safety aspects (Ibrahim, Osman, Bachok, & Mohamed, 2016: 234).

Variegations of Policy Recommendations of Islamic Education Curriculum in Indonesian Secondary Schools

Portraying the garnered interview data, the four teacher participants voiced a concern of sustainable professional development. It is proposed that TPD promotes several contributions in accordance with teacher engagement, i.e. “change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students” (Kennedy, 2014: 690). Consequently, it is worth mentioning that the government should equip teachers with adequate and systematic professional development when offering them higher degrees of autonomy to employ their professional judgment to modify curriculum and practical pedagogy (Qoyyimah, 2018: 16). This endeavor launches to strengthen the competencies of Islamic education teachers tackling it as a mandatory school subject, especially in junior secondary schools. It, further, reflects that TPD aims to provide a significant impact on the quality of Islamic education teachers and student learning.

Meanwhile, reentering the space that Islamic education has been established as a mandatory school subject in the 2013 Curriculum, textbooks for this subject have been geared for teachers and students. In the textbooks, it is important to notice that the five-step activities, i.e. observing, questioning, collecting information, associating, and

communicating, have been prescribed. Another finding exposes that informed by the interview data, the teacher participants expressed that the presence of the government-mandated textbooks of Islamic education restricts teachers' creativity in designing interactive learning activities. In response to this, the present study urges a need for policy makers, curriculum designers, and textbook developers of Islamic education school subject to put their emphasis on the design of existing textbooks. This drives to boost the quality of Islamic education, including the provision of learning resources that fits teachers' needs. This was also reported by You, Lee, & Craig (2019: 4) that the availability of tailored textbooks with the national curriculum should meet teachers' needs to offer their students balanced access in learning process. In this respect, textbooks serve to bridge the curriculum materials and teachers' choices (Polikoff, 2015: 2).

CONCLUSION

Depicting on the data as presented previously, this empirical study promotes best practices of Islamic education curriculum in Indonesian junior secondary schools. The practices cover the syllabus, lesson plan, learning resources, classroom-based practices, and authentic assessment. The government support is also elaborated in this study exposing continuous teacher professional development and provision of sufficient school facilities. The study, moreover, offers two recommendations for policy authorities who design Islamic education practices in Indonesia, particularly in junior secondary schools. The policy recommendations embrace facilitating Islamic education teachers with sustainable professional development and redesigning the government-prescribed textbooks.

The present study is limited in terms of generalizability since only four teachers handling Islamic education in two junior secondary schools in Central Java, Indonesia. This makes it impossible to generalize the findings of the study. Therefore, further studies with a larger number of teachers teaching Islamic education from different secondary schools may yield opposite sides of outcomes. In spite of the limitation, this study affords meaningful insights into policy recommendations that can be the clued point for conducting larger research highlighting the relevant issues on Islamic education curriculum.

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