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THE CHALLENGES OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION NOVICE TEACHERS IN TEACHING METHOD IN SARAWAK'S SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges faced by novice Islamic education teachers in Sarawak's secondary schools. Employing a phenomenological approach, it explores their lived experiences, beliefs, and strategies in promoting Islamic teachings. Limited research has examined the realities of early-career Islamic education teachers in East Malaysia, making this study timely and significant. Data were collected through purposive sampling and online interviews, offering rich perspectives on teachers' adaptation and classroom practices. The findings reveal teachers' personal initiatives to sustain Islamic education, alongside strategies to address common difficulties. However, heavy administrative duties and the demand for extensive online documentation emerged as major obstacles that undermine effective teaching. Participants also proposed ways to enhance systemic support and reduce workload burdens. The study concludes by discussing implications for policy and practice, offering recommendations to improve professional conditions and mentoring for novice educators. It highlights the critical role of Islamic education teachers in nurturing students' moral and spiritual growth, while underscoring the need for stronger institutional support in their professional journey.

Keywords: Islamic education, novice teachers, phenomenological study, teaching challenges, teacher adaptation.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Islamic education serves as a foundational pillar in Malaysia's national education philosophy, aiming to nurture balanced individuals through the integration of intellectual, spiritual, moral, and physical development. According to Al-Attas (1979), education in Islam aspires toward the "balanced growth of the total personality" through the cultivation of man's spirit, intellect, and physical faculties, thereby infusing faith into the entirety of one's being. In line with this vision, teachers particularly those in Islamic education are tasked not only with delivering content but also with shaping students' ethical and spiritual values through personal example and instructional practice (Kasim, Yusoff & Mansor, 2021).

Islamic education teachers are entrusted with the dual responsibility of being both subject-matter experts and moral exemplars. Their role extends beyond the classroom, influencing students through demeanor, conduct, communication, and lifestyle. Therefore, the quality of Islamic education hinges significantly on the preparedness and character of its teachers. In Malaysia, novice teachers typically defined as educators with less than five years of experience (Kasim, 2019; Stewart & Jansky, 2022) are often expected to fulfill these complex roles while simultaneously adjusting to the demands of professional teaching.

This includes managing large classrooms, utilizing 21st-century pedagogical strategies, and integrating Islamic values in an increasingly digital and pluralistic society.

Novice teachers frequently experience “reality shock” a mismatch between expectations set during teacher training and the realities of full-time teaching (Çakmak, Gündüz & Emstad, 2019). This transition is especially pronounced for Islamic education teachers, who may be placed in schools with limited resources, students with low Islamic literacy, or communities lacking strong Islamic educational traditions. The challenge is further exacerbated in rural regions like Sarawak, where the cultural and religious diversity presents additional pedagogical and relational complexities. As the Ministry of Education’s vision underscores holistic education (Kasim, 2021), novice Islamic education teachers are expected to shift from teacher-centered methods to student-centered approaches, such as contextual learning and active engagement strategies expectations that require high levels of adaptability, creativity, and resilience.

In such settings, novice teachers may struggle with classroom management, administrative overload, technological systems, and sociocultural barriers, all of which hinder their ability to deliver effective and meaningful Islamic instruction. These early-career experiences, if not properly understood and addressed, can lead to teacher burnout, disengagement, and ultimately attrition thereby threatening the quality and continuity of Islamic education. Therefore, a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of Islamic novice teachers is essential to strengthen professional development, improve institutional support, and ensure the fulfillment of Islamic educational goals.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although numerous studies have explored the challenges encountered by novice teachers in general (Parnabas et al., 2021; Kasim & Abdurajak, 2021), there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific experiences and perspectives of Islamic education novice teachers, particularly in the context of Sarawak’s secondary schools. While broad research has addressed issues such as classroom management, lesson planning, and teacher adaptation, very few have examined the nuanced and localized struggles of Islamic education teachers operating in culturally and religiously heterogeneous communities. This oversight has led to a limited understanding of how these teachers perceive, respond to, and overcome the challenges unique to their context.

According to Syam, Resyadi, and Sanusi (2023), novice teachers often face challenges in implementing higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), managing student behavior, and adjusting to rapidly evolving curricular frameworks such as the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM). These issues are compounded by systemic pressures, such as overburdening with clerical tasks and rigid online platforms (e.g., HRMIS, IDME, SPLKPM), which divert attention from core teaching duties and negatively impact teacher motivation and effectiveness.

Simah Mamat et al. (2021) emphasize that novice teachers are expected to act as facilitators of learning a role that demands pedagogical agility and emotional intelligence, both of which may be underdeveloped in early-career educators. Moreover, novice teachers in Sarawak may find themselves assigned to rural or semi-urban schools with limited technological infrastructure, poor facilities, or student populations with minimal exposure to Islamic practices. Such conditions create additional barriers to effective teaching and limit opportunities for meaningful engagement.

A study by Othman and Zaidi (2023) using the Controlled Rapid Approach to Curriculum Change (CRACC) model found that teachers often felt exhausted and overwhelmed by continuous curriculum reforms. These reforms, while intended to improve education quality, can inadvertently contribute to burnout among new teachers who must constantly adjust to unfamiliar expectations and systems. Given these realities, there is an urgent need to examine how novice Islamic education teachers perceive their roles, adapt their instructional methods, and navigate institutional and societal pressures in Sarawak. Without such focused inquiry, educational stakeholders risk overlooking the structural and emotional challenges that hinder the development of effective Islamic educators in underserved regions.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by focusing on the lived experiences of novice Islamic education teachers in Sarawak a region characterized by its ethnic diversity, unique sociocultural dynamics, and educational disparities. By capturing the voices of these early-career teachers, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic education is practiced, challenged, and adapted in real-world secondary school settings. Such insights are essential for informing future teacher training programs and policies aimed at supporting novice educators in Malaysia.

Second, the findings of this research have the potential to inform institutional stakeholders including school administrators, policymakers, and teacher educators about the kinds of support structures novice teachers need to thrive. For example, the study reveals how excessive non-teaching duties, inadequate mentorship, and a lack of professional autonomy can hinder instructional quality and emotional well-being. By identifying these factors, educational authorities can implement targeted strategies such as induction programs, professional learning communities, and differentiated workload systems to alleviate pressure and enhance teacher retention.

Third, the study offers practical value for current and future Islamic education teachers. By documenting the strategies used by novice educators to overcome challenges such as self-motivation, time management, and community engagement the research provides a repository of adaptive practices that others can learn from. Furthermore, understanding the emotional and professional journeys of novice teachers can foster greater empathy and collaboration among senior educators, thereby strengthening the overall school culture.

Finally, the implications of this research extend beyond Islamic education, offering broader insights into novice teacher development, educational equity, and curriculum reform in multicultural and rural contexts. In doing so, the study not only reinforces the importance of teacher-centered research in education but also aligns with Malaysia's national aspirations for holistic and inclusive educational excellence as outlined in the National Education Philosophy (Ministry of Education, 1988).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To analyze the Islamic novice teacher's perspective toward teaching method of secondary students in their early periods of teaching
- 2) To explore challenges faced by Islamic novice teachers in implementing the actual teaching and learning practices in their classroom among Sarawak's secondary teachers

3) To discover how Islamic novice teachers solve the arising challenges

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions directed this study:

- 1) What are the Islamic novice teacher's perspectives toward teaching method of secondary students in their early periods of teaching?
- 2) What are the main challenges faced by Islamic novice teachers in implementing the actual teaching and learning practices in their classroom?
- 3) How do the Islamic novice teachers solve the arisen challenges?

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study aims to investigate the personal experiences of Sarawak Islamic teachers to identify their challenges, professional development needs, and ways to solve the problems. This research has the potential to increase the quality of instruction and contribute to professional secondary teacher development by getting a deeper understanding of the experiences of novice teachers who might be facing various difficulties depending on the schools and district that they have taught. It helps the teacher to uphold skills, Islamic ideas, and practices to create a conducive atmosphere favorable to students. Furthermore, the outcomes of this research might assist future Islamic teachers in efficiently interacting with students and promoting Islamic values. In addition, by engaging in Sarawak novice teachers' experiences, allows future new teachers enhance their knowledge, skills and also become more effective educators. This knowledge allows them to make informed decisions about the most appropriate approaches to use in the classroom practically and efficiently. When the novice know how to integrate with the challenges through this research, Islamic novice teachers will be able to tackle the hardship during the teaching and learning session later will produce successful learning lessons and intelligence generations of students with noble attitude.

The findings of this study will be able to aid other Islamic Teachers in planning and making improvements to the previous approaches of teaching. This finding will be able to facilitate the training institutes to produce high-quality teachers in the future. This study also helped Islamic optionist novice teachers handle various challenges more confidently and independently when they were placed in schools throughout the country later on. Besides that, the findings also can aid the teachers in matching the current needs and demands of teaching and learning practices. This research enables novice teachers to develop a deeper understanding of various aspects of teaching, they can build their confidence, feel more prepared, and be better equipped to handle the demands of the profession. As a result, this study was carried out to better understand the experiences and challenges of Islamic Education rookie instructors in implementing teaching in their classroom practices. Lastly, this research will enlighten senior teachers, administrations and authorities to hold some programs to produce excellent competency among the teacher trainees and help the novice teacher to adapt with the difficulties that they faced.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the challenges faced by novice Islamic education teachers in Sarawak's secondary schools. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select

three female novice teachers who graduated from the Bachelor of Education program in 2022 and had approximately two to three years of teaching experience. Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews, conducted in written form via WhatsApp using Word documents, with follow-up questions sent through voice notes for clarification. This method allowed participants to provide in-depth responses based on their personal teaching experiences. In addition to interviews, document analysis of relevant academic articles and journals from platforms such as Google Scholar and university library databases was conducted to support and enrich the study findings.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving several stages: transcription of interviews, coding of recurring ideas and patterns, theme development, and interpretation of findings. This approach provided a systematic means of identifying core issues related to teaching challenges, strategies, and beliefs. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant confidentiality, and maintaining anonymity through pseudonyms. Overall, the chosen methodology allowed for a rich and comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences of novice Islamic education teachers in the Sarawak context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question	Theme	Key Findings
RQ1: What are the Islamic novice teacher's perspectives toward teaching method of secondary students in their early periods of teaching?	Lack of Facilities	• "internet and electricity is okay" • "facilities... not sufficient... combining 2 classes... 35 students... wooden block... noise distractions" • "no LCD... need to bring students to library... far away... waste of time" • "school moving very slow towards digital-based education" • "chalk and talk... traditional lectures" • "deficiency teaches the meaning of difficulty... an opportunity I should not waste" • "experience will be beneficial in the future... today's hardships for future pleasures"
	Increasing Workload of Teachers	• "e-Operasi, PBD, HRMIS... waste of time... burdening teachers" • "not familiar with actual work... why everything need to be passed on the first year?" • "IDME always jammed... irritating... stressful" • "PBD is less effective... focus should be on teaching" • "feel suffocated with the extra things at school"

Islamic Novice Teachers' Perspectives Toward Teaching Methods in Their Early Career

The study revealed that novice Islamic education teachers experienced initial difficulties in adapting theory into practice, especially in managing students with diverse backgrounds and behaviors. This aligns with Stewart and Jansky (2022), who highlighted that novice teachers often face stress due to the mismatch between theoretical preparation and practical realities, including strained relationships with seasoned educators and rigid school systems. The contradiction between teacher training and actual field expectations may lead to

self-doubt and attrition among new teachers.

Interestingly, unlike many prior studies (Sydnor, Davis & Daley, 2024; Silva, Farias & Mesquita, 2021), respondents in this study reported positive experiences with school management, stating they felt supported by senior teachers and administrators. This contrasts with findings by Sydnor et al. (2024), where novice teachers reported feeling unheard and unsupported by school leaders. Furthermore, teachers noted behavioral differences across student age groups, with upper form students displaying more discipline issues. This resonates with Sydnor et al.'s (2024) observation that behavioral problems especially post-pandemic were among the top challenges faced by early-career teachers.

Research Question	Theme	Key Findings
RQ2: What are the main challenges faced by Islamic novice teachers in implementing the actual teaching and learning practices in their classroom?	Lack of Facilities	• “internet and electricity is okay” • “facilities... not sufficient... combining 2 classes... 35 students... wooden block... noise distractions” • “no LCD... need to bring students to library... far away... waste of time” • “school moving very slow towards digital-based education” • “chalk and talk... traditional lectures” • “deficiency teaches the meaning of difficulty... an opportunity I should not waste” • “experience will be beneficial in the future... today’s hardships for future pleasures”
	Lack of Islamic Life-style	• “foster awareness of the importance of true understanding of Islam” • “students... don’t know how to read Al-Quran or Jawi” • “students developed thought of ‘education is not important’” • “weak in religious fundamentals and motivation” • “lack of morals... disrespect for teachers... interferes with learning” • “situation quite social... bullying, rowdiness, truancy”
	Feeling Stress and Burnout	• “sometimes... my mood will be in bad condition” • “just a little burnout... need to handle it” • “hoping that my momentum will remain okay”
	Welcoming Surrounding	• “school management... always welcoming and supporting” • “senior teachers... guide me how to solve problems” • “cooperation with authorities... no issue... Al-hamdulillah” • “principal diligent... teachers teach everything A to Z”

Challenges Faced by Islamic Novice Teachers in Implementing Teaching and Learning

The dual role of Islamic education teachers as academic instructors and moral guides adds complexity to the

teaching process. Teachers reported struggling with students who lacked basic religious understanding and motivation, particularly in rural areas. These findings support those of Syam, Resyadi and Sanusi (2023), who highlighted the gap between novice teachers' goals and students' engagement and capabilities. The mismatch between intended outcomes and classroom realities often leads to professional frustration.

Participants also raised concerns over being overwhelmed by administrative duties and professional development tasks. Makoa and Segalo (2021) reported similar frustrations, where teachers felt burdened by external responsibilities that restricted their instructional effectiveness. Similarly, Syam et al. (2023) found that new teachers often felt like "filing clerks" due to excessive documentation, lacking clarity about their professional duties post-graduation. Steinhoff (2024) emphasized that long working hours spent grading, planning, and fulfilling administrative roles — negatively affect teachers' work-life balance.

Another significant concern is the lack of structured mentorship. Many Islamic institutions, especially in underfunded areas, lack proper support systems, making new teachers feel isolated. Mentorship is critical to reduce burnout and ensure teaching quality (Fecho et al., 2021). Without it, teachers may struggle to cope with classroom demands and institutional expectations.

Research Question	Theme	Key Findings
RQ3: How do Islamic novice teachers solve the challenges they face?	Initiatives to Motivate Themselves	• "ask other teachers if I don't understand... push myself" • "focus on learning self-control... adapt... good mindset" • "remind ourselves... students in front of us don't know... our job to educate" • "look for hidden wisdom... be positive"
	Hoping for Authority to Lessen the Burden	• "co-curricular not burdensome... issue is student attendance" • "too many platforms and systems... should upgrade, not add more" • "hope clerical work is not given to teachers" • "work is never finished... follow the flow... enjoy the journey"
	Rewards	• "don't need aid... just lessen programmes or on-line key-in" • "allowance for students' reward... flight ticket home... flexible holidays" • "moral support... reward yourself... enjoy days well"

How Islamic Novice Teachers Overcome Challenges

Participants emphasized the importance of time management and self-motivation in coping with early-career challenges. Organizing tasks by urgency and maintaining a positive mindset were seen as crucial to reducing stress. These self-initiated strategies align with Kasim, Yusoff and Mansor (2021), who stressed that teaching is not just about delivering knowledge but also about inspiring and guiding students.

Experiences in rural Sarawak schools particularly shaped teachers' understanding of differentiated instruction, student rapport, and adaptive pedagogy affirming insights from Syam, Resyadi and Sanusi (2023).

Professional development programs were cited as essential in helping teachers critically assess and refine their pedagogical practices. According to Fecho et al. (2021), such programs must be continuous and directly address real classroom problems to be effective. Collaboration with administrators, peers, and participation in induction programs also emerged as key coping mechanisms. Yet, Steinhoff (2024) reported that a significant portion of new teachers felt unsupported, underscoring the need for institutional commitment to mentorship.

Lastly, cultivating patience, perseverance, and a growth mindset was seen as vital to sustaining motivation and overcoming adversity. A positive attitude helps foster resilience and professional growth (Syam, Resyadi & Sanusi, 2023). Teachers who believe in their ability to improve are more likely to thrive despite structural and emotional challenges.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study explored the challenges faced by novice Islamic education teachers in Sarawak's secondary schools and how they navigate these early career experiences. The findings revealed key concerns related to teaching students of diverse backgrounds, managing heavy workloads, coping with limited facilities, and addressing the lack of Islamic values among students. Teachers also reported experiencing stress and burnout, yet they demonstrated resilience through self-motivation, hope for institutional support, and personal reward systems.

To support novice teachers, several practical recommendations are proposed. First, new Islamic educators must be proactive, creative, and willing to seek guidance from peers and mentors while adapting to diverse classroom contexts. Second, senior teachers should play a more active role in mentoring, offering consistent pedagogical and emotional support. Third, school administrators should provide space for gradual adjustment and pair new teachers with experienced mentors from the same subject area. Induction programs should be structured to address early-career challenges and prevent role overload.

Lastly, the Ministry of Education should enhance teacher training programs to better reflect current classroom realities. Incorporating structured Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and offering state-level incentives and affordable professional development can further aid in teacher retention and growth. Addressing these areas can help create a more sustainable and supportive environment for novice Islamic educators and improve the overall quality of Islamic education in rural Malaysia.

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