

# PRACTICES AND CONCEPTS OF INTEGRATED EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SELECTED ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS IN THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the practices and concepts of integrated education system in selected Islamic integrated schools in the Malay Archipelago, the underlying factors and issues regarding the schools' leadership and management. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, namely school leaders and teachers. Preliminary findings suggest that the teachers and the schools leaders have positive perceptions on the concept, practices and implementation of Islamic Integrated schools. Furthermore, it was observed that these schools were committed to deliver the best level of quality Islamic education by improving their teachers' teaching skills and through a leadership style that engenders commitment from the teachers. The findings revealed a number of important implications for the future development of the Islamic integrated schools in order to continuously serve the needs of the students, the parents, and the Muslim ummah.*

**Field of Research:** *Islamic integrated education, Islamic schools, Islamic curriculum, school management, Malay Archipelago.*

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## 1. Introduction

The Malay Archipelago is located at the heart of South East Asia, encompassing Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, and the Philippines. A recent by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012) suggests that South East Asian Muslims are among the most devout group of Muslims in the world (Bellman, 2012), particularly in the performing the *zakah* (almsgiving) and *sawm* (fasting), acts of worship that are part of the Five Pillars of the Islamic faith.

Religious commitment in Islam is not build on indoctrination but through a process of life-long learning. For Muslims, Islam is not only as a religion but a way of life. Its teachings cover aspects both the worldly and hereafter. Acquiring a good understanding of Islam involves becoming a life-long learner of Islam.

Muslims have always emphasised the need for education especially, for the younger generation. It was recorded that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once agreed to the suggestion that grant freedom to prisoners-of-war under the Muslims' custody if they can teach a number of Muslim children to read and write. The Muslim tradition of knowledge and scholarly endeavours continues throughout the history. The Mongol raid on Baghdad in 1258, the conquest of Muslim lands by Western colonial powers during 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century, and other catastrophic events in the Muslim history have not prevented Muslims from continuing this tradition. Muslims everywhere in the world

including the Malay Archipelago have continued establishing Islamic institutions of learning and produced prominent scholars who are recognised throughout the Muslim world and beyond.

### 1.1 Background

Islamic integrated schools emphasise the inculcation the Islamic values using an education system that is relevant to the needs of the Muslim society. They also aim to develop students who are balanced and have a holistic perspective on knowledge which would create a good person (*insan*) (Sidek Baba, 2003). Wan Mohd Zahid Mohd Nordin (2003) defines Islamic Education as the whole approach to teaching and learning that inculcates Islamic values. The entire school ecosystem, including the school's leadership and administration, its curriculum, and its surrounding community, are responsible for the inculcation of these values. The best framework for an integrated school is not only about teaching Islamic lessons but also applying Islamic values in all aspects of the schools (Haron Din & Sobri Salamon, 1988; Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 2005).

Islamic integrated schools differ from the traditional Islamic school because they emphasise the importance of teaching both Islamic subjects and *aqliyah* (academic) subjects. One particular trend that has emerged in many Muslim societies is the increase in the student enrolment in religious schools including the Islamic integrated schools. This could be due to Muslims' perception that national schools are not teaching their children Islamic values and are more secular in its pedagogy and objectives.

Secularisation, i.e. the separation of religion and the state, was among the strategy used by the colonial administrators to weaken unity among the native society and their rulers. Freedom from religion was propagated as liberation from authoritarian dogmas and beliefs. The Malay Archipelagos has a long history of colonialism, dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of the Portuguese and the Spanish. In the following centuries, the British, the Dutch, and the French colonial powers gained control over the region. Malaysia and Singapore were under the control of the British while Indonesia was under the Dutch rule. Native youths were provided Western-based education with the main purpose of producing officers who would serve the colonial administration. During this period, Islamic education was suppressed both directly and indirectly. The colonial administration gave very little support for any Islamic education institution and resorted to using force whenever they perceive an institution as a threat.

Before its independence, the integration of the academic and Islamic knowledge in Malaysia was pioneered by a group of progressive, Middle-Eastern graduates labeled as *Kaum Muda* (The Young Reformists). They were opposed by traditionally-inclined group of scholars known as *Kaum Tua* (The Old Conservatives) (Rosnani Hashim, 2004). The *Kaum Tua* were defending the orthodox way of learning Islamic subjects, which they perceive as the best way to produce scholars in Islamic fields of knowledge. However, the orthodox system was inadequate in terms of producing graduates who could fill important professional roles needed by society. The modern madrasah that the *Kaum Muda* established offered both Islamic subjects and the previously ignored academic subjects such as mathematics and science.

Many *pondok* and *madrasah* in pre-1947 Malaysia and Singapore and the Indonesian *pasentren* offer religious subjects such as *fiqh*, *syariah*, and Arabic Language as part of their curriculum, with very few *aqliyah* (academic) subjects. After its separation from Malaysia, Singaporean *pondok* and *madrasah*

underwent rigorous governmental transformation as part of a plan to assimilate the Malay Muslims into the rest of the society. As a result, religious subjects were sidelined in favour of secular academics subjects (Wilson, 1978), creating a demand among certain Muslim parents for religious schools as an alternative to the mainstream Singaporean education system.

The Islamic school system in Indonesia had gone through various changes throughout the decades. Before 1975, *pasentrens* were a training ground for religious leaders or *imams*. In 1975, a decree was proclaimed by the government to modernise the *pasentrens*. The *pasentrens* were accused of being backward and not keeping up with rapidly changing modern world. Their graduates often face difficulty in getting jobs because of their unrecognised qualification.

Islamic education systems and schools in these countries face a similar challenge, which is the quest for a curriculum that integrates both the religious and academic subjects. An integrated curriculum and school system is one way of producing students with good background in Islamic knowledge and able to meet the demands of the national workforce. Currently, not much has been written about the Islamic integrated schools. This study investigated the best practices in a number of selected Malaysian, Singaporean, and Indonesian Islamic integrated schools, with the aim of learning about factors that could lead to the success of the Islamic integrated education system.

## 2. Literature Review

### The Concept of Integrated Education

Tajol Ariffin Noordin and Nor Aini Dan (2007) argue that Western education system is mainly based on empirical knowledge and excludes the revealed knowledge. In other words, this education system is disconnected from God and religion. This line of thinking is the result of viewing all field of knowledge using the empirical perspective. The knowledge of social sciences and the arts are treated similarly to the 'hard' sciences that have very little concern for values and subjectivity (Zahra Al Zeera, 2001). Moneer M. al-Otaibi and Hakim M. Rashid (1997, p12) summarise how colonialism changed the traditional Islamic education system.

The second half of the 19th century C.E., therefore, saw many reforms introduced into the traditional Islamic system that brought it more in line with the European approach. As the stage was set for the eventual colonial domination of the Muslim world by the European powers, a form of educational colonialism had already been firmly planted in the Islamic state. The dual educational system, one religious and one secular, that came to characterize the Muslim world was not, therefore, the sole invention of the colonizers.

Syed Naquib Al-Attas presented the fundamental concepts and philosophy of an integrated education in the 1<sup>st</sup> World Conference on Islamic Education in Makkah, 1977 (S.M. al-Naquib al-Attas, 1977). The conference came up with the resolution that every Muslim nation should prioritise the integration of Islamic values in their education system. This resolution marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of modern Islam education system.

Mohd Kamal Hassan (2010) urged for Muslims to return to the Quranic paradigm of development. Colonisation and globalization has lead many Muslim nations to implement education system that mirrors the Western educational philosophy of the west without much thought about its impact on

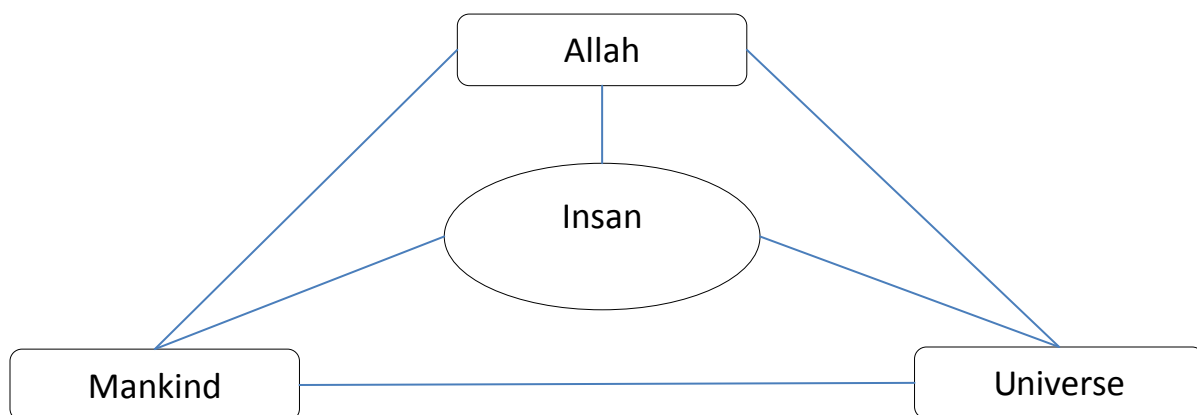
Islam and the Muslim society. In this context, the notion of the *Ulu Al Albab* or “people of sound reasoning” is of the utmost importance. What is needed to realise this vision is an educational system where the revealed knowledge is inculcated with the worldly *aqliyah* or academic knowledge. The word *Albab* that stems from the word *aql* which means intellect or reason is mentioned several times in the Quran. Thus, it is imperative that the education system must be focus on producing this type of individuals. The foundations (philosophy), curriculum and pedagogy must be geared towards this aim. Mohd Kamal Hassan further explained that there are several types of Islamic education system:

- the completely secular system where only the *aqliyah* subjects are taught.
- the predominantly religious educational system where few *aqliyah* subjects are taught
- the predominantly worldly educational system where few Islamic subjects are taught
- the system that offers a balance of Islamic and *aqliyah* subjects
- the system where the two streams, Islamic and *aqliyah*, are brought into meaningful and dynamic interaction with one another

### Characteristics of Integrated Education

Islamic education is crucial for every individual Muslim. An important principle and feature of Islamic education is it concerns both life in this world and the hereafter. Through this approach Muslims are enabled to progress materially or spiritually, in accordance with the values stated in the Quran.

The Islamic educational system is concerned with the development of Man as a whole being where he or she must first have knowledge of Allah before acquiring the other fields of knowledge. In fact, having knowledge of Allah and belief in Him, and realising his nature through the acquisition of knowledge may lead him to follow the commandments of Allah and seek His pleasure. Tajol Ariffin Noordin and Nor Aini Dan (2007) postulates a model of integrated education as human as the central point while God, Universe and Mankind act as peripheral to the achievement of knowledge, as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Integrated education model (Tajol Ariffin Noordin & Nor Aini Dan, 2007)

Islam does not restrict the fields of knowledge to religious studies but it always encourages man to discover scientific knowledge. Directing man’s intellect towards the universe may draw him to

realise of the existence of the Creator. The Islamic education system requires Man to utilise the whole range of human faculties, physical and non-physical, in order to know Allah as God and realise his or her duty as His servant to contribute in the development of society.

### Research Question

The main objective of this paper is to discuss practices, concept, and implementation of Islamic integrated school in the Malay Archipelago, particularly in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Thus, this paper will centre on the following research question: what are the concepts, practices and implementation of integrated educational system in the selected Islamic schools in Malay Archipelago?

### 3. Research Design and Methodology

The findings of this paper were obtained through the qualitative approach. Data was mainly gathered using semi-structured interviews. As explained by Patton (2002), interviews are done when behaviours and processes can not be observed properly. Given the fact that we were faced with time and financial constraints, we were unable to observe the teachers and principals while they were performing their duties. An interview protocol was then developed to help guide interviewers based on the research question.

### Sample

The schools involved in the study were selected using theoretical sampling. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describes theoretical sampling as selecting cases from a population after assessing critical parameters regarding the population that are related to the study. For this study, the school chosen were Islamic integrated schools in Malaysian, Singapore and Indonesia with a good academic track record, as acknowledged by the respective education authority. Specifically, these schools manage to produce a high percentage of students with excellent results in the public examinations. The schools are:

1. Sekolah Menengah Imtiaz, Malaysia (Imtiaz)
2. Madrasah Al-Amin, Malaysia (Al-Amin)
3. Madrasah Aljunied Al Islamiah, Singapore (Aljunied)
4. Sekolah Berasrama Integrasi Gombak, Malaysia (Integrasi Gombak)
5. Pasentren Gontor, Solo, Indonesia (Gontor)

**Table 1: Number of teachers interviewed**

Country	Number of teachers interviewed
Malaysia	7
Singapore	5
Indonesia	6

A total of 18 teachers and principals were interviewed (see Table 1). The interviewees vary in terms of teaching experience, ranging from a few decades to just a few years. The interviews were conducted *in-situ* and recorded using digital audio and video recorders, after obtaining consent from

the interviewees and the school. Transcriptions of the audio and video recordings were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis produced a list of themes describing the practices and concepts of the schools. The themes' validity and reliability were checked through multiple-investigator triangulation.

## 4. Findings

### The concept of Islamic integrated schools

The Islamic integrated schools were established with a number of objectives in mind. These objectives are similar although they are described differently. For example Al Amin aspires to produce students who are *soleh wa musleh*, Muslims with firm believe in their religion and are able to inspire the same level of believe in others. Imtiaz's aim is to develop students with Quranic, encyclopedic, and ijthadic (Quran-based, vastly knowledgeable, and critical-minded) qualities. Aljunied wants their students to become scholars of the highest calibre, *as warastal al anbiyya'* (the successors of the Prophets).

Essentially, the schools put great emphasize on students character building, particularly the development of leadership qualities. The school hopes to produce leaders who are capable of serving the nation and the Muslim ummah. Student development is also viewed from a holistic perspective, encompassing the physical, intellectual, spiritual, and mental aspects. The schools believe that it is important for the students to be taught about Islam in a practical manner. For this reason, the schools assign their students duties and responsibilities in classrooms, dormitories, clubs and societies, and at the school level.

The quality of students is determined from multiple aspects including but not limited academic and co-curricular achievements. Their student assessment system is much more comprehensive than the system in government schools and includes indicators such as adherence to Islamic practices and Quranic reading skill.

### Curriculum

All the schools in this sample are private institutions except Integrasi Gombak. Integrasi Gombak is a government school and fully implements the national curriculum. The private institutions, on the other hand, have some autonomy over the design their curriculum, especially with respect to the Islamic components. They are still required to offer specific academic subjects such as mathematics, as directed by the education authority. Their curriculum appears to be a mix of academic subjects and Islamic subjects. Islamic subjects are either taken from their self-developed curriculum or the national curriculum. The inclusion of the national curriculum subjects allows their students to sit for the national standardised examinations, which is an important entrance qualification to many higher learning institutions local and abroad.

Another major feature in the schools' curriculum is the emphasis on Arabic language proficiency. The Arabic language is particularly important to the study of Islam because the most of the main references of Islamic knowledge are in Arabic, including the Quran. Mastering the language will help the students to learn about Islam from the main sources instead of having to learn through secondary sources such as translated works. This will also help them to understand the classical work of earlier Muslim scholars and to synthesise new knowledge based on the classical and modern references.

The curriculum in these schools is also closely-integrated with the Quran. The Quran is the considered the highest source of knowledge in Islam. Since the students here learn Arabic, they are

able to at least understand textual meaning of the Quran, if not the contextual meaning. They are also required to memorise particular chapters or the whole Quran, depending on the school's requirements. Imtiaz, for example, trains its students to become *huffaz* (memorisers) of the Quran. Their students' schedule is carefully organised in order to facilitate the process of Quranic memorisation. The mornings are allocated for the classroom learning while the afternoons are dedicated for Quranic memorisation sessions. Al-Amin sets a lower requirement for their students, which is only a few *juz'* (parts) of the Quran to be memorised every year.

The schools also believe that the co-curricular aspects are an integral part of the holistic development of the students. Besides offering uniform bodies, societies, and sports, the schools organise programmes such as annual camping trips, visits to other schools and places of interests, sending students to serve as *imam* at nearby mosques, and community services programmes. Some of these programmes are compulsory and are part of the students' assessment.

### Teaching and learning

The practices of teaching and learning at the Islamic integrated schools appear to be student-centred. Many student-centred approaches including problem-based learning, cooperative learning, and team teaching are applied in the classrooms. The good academic track record of these schools may provide a case for wider implementation student-centred learning in government schools. However, these schools are mostly smaller compared to government schools, allowing them to be flexible with their implementation of student-centred approaches.

Assessments of students differ according to the type of the subjects. For the subjects that are adapted or self-developed, the assessments are supervised by the schools' curriculum unit, department, or committee. The standards of the adapted or self-developed curriculum are revised from time to time, although it mostly happens when the need arises. For instance, if too many students seem to be struggling with a particular subject, the supervising group will discuss the possible causes and how to help the students. When Al-Amin teachers realised that their students were not meeting the standard Quranic memorisation requirement, they decreased the number of the of Quranic *juz'* (parts) to be memorised.

Students are also trained to exercise *itjihadic* (critical) thinking when solving problems. This is to prepare them as future Muslim scholars who will contribute in solving complicated issues and problems related to the Muslim ummah. The teaching and usage of English is also given importance as a way of helping students to reach out to a broader segment of society. A teacher at Imtiaz mentioned that he challenged his students to discuss the Islamic method of cattle slaughtering from the scientific perspective. According to him, this type of exercise is an important step in the integration of Islamic and academic knowledge.

The teachers describe collegial support in the form of discussions and feedback as part of their working culture. This is guided by concept of *syura* or mutual consultation, an important decision-making principle in Islam. Opinions are pooled from the group involved before the appointed leader arrives to an informed decision. *Syura* allows teachers to gain wide perspective of an issue quickly and collectively. The decisions made through *syura* are not dependent on the view of majority but based on the deliberation on the matter discussed.



*Syura* is fostered by having a mutual commitment and belief in the schools' mission and vision, aims, and philosophy. Many teachers at Aljunied consider the school as their second home. They try to fit their daily schedule so that they can optimise the amount of the time they spend at school. A sense of belonging and loyalty to school is a strong motivator for the teachers in performing their duties.

Discussions on teaching practices are often done in order to help teachers to improve professionally. They are sources of feedback on the teachers' performance and for getting feedback on the curriculum. In Gontor, discussions are held at the department level as well as with the other branches of the school. The teachers of Integrasi Gombak often discuss with the school counsellors on how to help students who need special attention.

## **Training**

The school are committed to the continuous development of their staff. Trainings for the teachers are conducted for professional development, self-development, and teaching-related.

Teaching-related trainings are aimed at improving the teachers' teaching skills. It includes ICT skills training, pedagogical training, and subject-specific training. Professional training develops the teachers' skills in other areas of their work, for instance teamwork and managerial skills. Self-development trainings, which target the development of the teachers' inner self, are considered highly important by the schools. Spiritual-enhancement retreats, congregation praying, and talks by distinguish scholars and notable speakers are example of self-development training done in the schools.

Training can be costly. Not every school, especially the private ones, can afford to send all their teachers for continuous training. However, this constraint has not discouraged these schools from providing adequate training when necessary. Aljunied teachers without any formal qualification as a teacher are send for training at the National Institute of Education on weekends and after office-hours with some assistance from the the Singaporean government. As a school owned by the state government, Imtiaz teachers receive numerous opportunities for trainings, organised by the state government.

## **5. Discussion**

Islamic integrated schools provide a viable solution for a holistic and integrated Islamic education system. This system offers parents and students the ability to choose between studying in Islamic studies or in professional fields such as medicine, engineering, and accountancy. And regardless of the choice, parents are at least assured that their children will have a good foundation in Islamic knowledge.

The growing number of applicants suggests that Islamic integrated education is gaining acceptance among the Muslims as an alternative to government school and the *madrasahs*, although this trend is yet to be considered widespread. The number of Islamic integrated schools is much smaller compared to other types of schools. It is possible that the schools will not be able to cater for the growing demand unless they pursue an aggressive expansion plan in the near future.

Currently, these schools select their students through entrance examinations and interviews. The relative small number of students enables the school to maintain a good academic track record. It remains to be seen if these schools can handle a growing student population while maintaining their level of quality.

The schools in this sample vary in terms of their curriculum design and the aspects of Islamic education that they choose to emphasize. The lack of uniform features in their curriculum raises a few important questions. Is it better for Islamic integrated schools follow their own specific integrated curriculum? How would parents evaluate which school offer the better curriculum?

In terms of teaching and administration, the school benefits from a sense of belonging shared that is among the school's community. This is certainly an advantage that Islamic integrated schools have since they also carefully select their own staff. Government schools may not be able to adopt the exact same practices, but at the very least they can adapt the practices in a manner that best suits their situation.

## 6. Conclusion

The need for a holistic Islamic education system has never been more important. The Islamic integrated schools offer a viable option for a holistic and integrated education system that can meet the needs of both the Muslim ummah and the nation. At the same time, these schools are in the developing stage in some countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia while still in the pioneering stage in other countries such as Singapore. Islamic religious schools have the potential to help Muslim, irrespective of whether they are a majority or minority group. As researchers, we can contribute to the development of an Islamic education system by understanding the challenges and issues faced by these schools and suggesting ideas and improvements.

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