



The Paradox of Islamic Education: A Phenomenological Study of Muslim Communities' Preference for Islamic Elementary Schools

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Article Information:

Received July 15, 2024

Revised August 18, 2024

Accepted September 13, 2024

Keywords: *Perspective, muslim community, Islamic elementary school*

Abstract

Parents' interest in enrolling their children in Islamic Elementary Schools is remarkably high, even though the cost of attending these schools is relatively expensive. This contrasts with public schools, which are generally free of charge. This study aims to explore and explain why Islamic Elementary Schools are highly preferred by Indonesian Muslim communities, particularly parents. The research employs a qualitative method with a case study approach. Research data were collected through in-depth interviews with five participants, consisting of the principal, teachers, and parents, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model. The findings indicate that parents' interest in sending their children to Islamic Elementary Schools is influenced by three main factors: theological, sociological, and academic. (i) The theological factor refers to parents' perspectives based on religious considerations. (ii) The sociological factor relates to the growing positive image of Islamic schools in Indonesia. (iii) The academic factor is associated with the schools' ability to achieve high academic performance among both students and teachers. These results provide preliminary insights for future researchers to examine this issue in different contexts and with broader analytical perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Educational choices for children are an important and interesting topic in Indonesian Muslim society today. Muslim parents tend to choose schools with a strong religious foundation such as Islamic elementary schools, integrated Islamic elementary schools, and Muhammadiyah schools over public elementary schools. This phenomenon shows that parents take pride in sending their children to educational institutions based on religious values (Haryati et al., 2024; Taqiudin, 2020). Malfi et al (2023); Mualimin (2017); Rusadi & Fauzi (2022) explains that the shift in perspectives on education has occurred in line with increasing social demands in society. Parents are concerned about the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency, so they try to equip their children from an early age with religious values and noble character. This is consistent with the view of Hasan (2023); Moslimany et al (2024); Yudhyarta et al (2025), who emphasizes the importance of these values as the main pillars in implementing integrated Islamic education.

How to cite:

Hamzah, M. I., Febriani, A., & Akinfolarin, C. (2024). The Paradox of Islamic Education: A Phenomenological Study of Muslim Communities' Preference for Islamic Elementary Schools. *Khalifa: Journal of Islamic Education*, 8(2), 83–93.

E-ISSN:

2549-4783

Published by:

Islamic Studies and Development Center Universitas Negeri Padang

The development of Integrated Islamic Schools in Indonesia has been rapid. In the past two decades, their number has reached more than 10,000 educational institutions ranging from kindergarten to high school (Azra, 2015; Latief et al., 2021; Musaddad, 2023). This growth has also been influenced by the decentralization of education policy, which has given local government's greater authority to establish educational institutions (Ummah, 2022). Integrated Islamic schools represent an educational model that integrates general and religious knowledge into a single unified curriculum. Unlike other types of educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, *madrasahs*, or public schools these schools have distinctive characteristics. *Pesantren* focus on the deepening of religious sciences such as the Quran, Hadith, *nahwu*, *sharaf*, and *fiqh*, while public schools place greater emphasis on the mastery of modern sciences, both natural and social (Johar et al., 2024). *Madrasahs* serve as a bridge between traditional and modern education, although in practice, their graduates are often considered not to have fully mastered either domain (Rohman et al., 2023).

Although parents' main motivation in choosing schools is the moral and character development of their children, they also expect good academic quality. Indonesian Muslim parents seek a balance between religious character formation and academic achievement (Allen et al., 2018; ter Avest et al., 2015). Therefore, the ideal school is one that can combine the mastery of modern knowledge with a strong religious foundation.

This study seeks to answer why many Muslim parents choose Islamic Elementary Schools as educational institutions for their children. It is based on the notion that Integrated Islamic Schools have become a new trend in Islamic education in Indonesia, especially among urban communities, despite their relatively high tuition fees (Abidin et al., 2022; Rustandi et al., 2023). This phenomenon indicates the growing appeal of the full-day education system implemented in these schools. The results of this study are expected to provide useful insights into Muslim parents' perspectives on Islamic Elementary Schools and to serve as a reference for other educational institutions in developing their educational directions and institutional systems.

One Integrated Islamic Elementary School in the West Sumatra region was selected as the research site. Although relatively new and located close to several other elementary schools, public interest in this school continues to increase each year. This condition suggests that there is a particular attraction among parents to the integrated Islamic education model.

Education is essentially a conscious effort to develop human potential and bring about transformation in knowledge, behavior, and social values. Islamic education has distinctive characteristics because it is based on the Quran and Hadith as its primary sources. Its ultimate goal is not only behavioral change or intellectual development but also the formation of human beings who live in harmony with divine guidance (Surbakti et al., 2024). The success of education is greatly influenced by various supporting components, one of which is the learning method used by teachers to achieve educational goals in accordance with Islamic values.

The history of Islamic education in Indonesia shows a long dynamic shaped by government policies within the national education system (Anshori et al., 2022; Kosim et al., 2023). Until the late 1970s, the system remained dichotomous between religious and general knowledge. However, since the reform movement in the 1980s, Muslim educators have made efforts to introduce a more integrated model of Islamic education. This system is based on the value of *tawhid*, which forms the foundation

of all aspects of education including objectives, curriculum, and learning processes in order to serve Allah SWT and fulfill the role of humankind as *kehalifah* on earth.

This idea became the foundation for the emergence of the concept of Integrated Islamic Schools in Indonesia. Ghofururrohim et al (2024); Hanif (2023); Waharjani et al (2024) emphasizes that Islamic educational philosophy is built upon the relationship between humans and God, the universe, fellow humans, worldly life, and the hereafter. With this foundation, integrated Islamic education seeks to shape knowledgeable, faithful, and moral individuals who are able to face modern challenges without losing their spiritual values.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design. According to Cresswell (2016); Engkizar et al (2018), (2023); Kara (2023); Saldaña (2021), qualitative research is a systematic approach used to examine a phenomenon in its natural context without manipulation or hypothesis testing. It uses natural methods, as the expected results are not generalizations based on quantitative measures but rather an understanding of the meaning (qualitative aspects) of the phenomenon being studied.

The selected informants met four criteria: (i) having a good understanding of the issues studied, (ii) being actively involved in the relevant field, (iii) having sufficient time to provide information to the researcher, and (iv) providing information consistent with the actual conditions in the field (Aisyah et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2025; Zainal et al., 2022). To fulfill these criteria, the informants consisted of the principal, teachers, and parents at Islamic Elementary School. After all interviews were completed, the data were transcribed, and the researcher identified and categorized themes relevant to the research objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Islamic Elementary Schools are educational institutions that combine general and religious curricula through a full-day school system. This learning model aims to instill Islamic values from an early age, encourage Islamic behavior in daily life, and develop students' potential to the fullest. Field observations show that many Muslim families are willing to spend relatively high educational costs to send their children to such institutions. At the kindergarten and elementary levels, admission fees range from IDR 4,000,000 to IDR 5,000,000, with monthly tuition fees between IDR 400,000 and IDR 600,000. Although these costs are higher than those of public schools or *madrasahs*, which often provide free programs, parents do not object because they perceive added value in terms of character formation and religious guidance (Muzakki & Nurdin, 2022).

This condition illustrates a paradigm shift within Indonesian Muslim society. In the past, non-Islamic educational institutions such as Catholic schools were often regarded as symbols of educational excellence (Inawati, 2017; Latifa et al., 2022). However, integrated Islamic schools have now become a source of pride among Muslim communities. This phenomenon also reflects the transformation of Islamic *da'wah*, which has expanded into the realm of formal education, moving beyond traditional centers such as mosques or *majelis taklim* (Lubis, 2025; Thoha & Ibrahim, 2023).

A distinctive feature of education in Islamic Elementary Schools is the emphasis on comprehensive character development (*sumumiyah*). The entire learning process is connected to Islamic values whether in speech, attire, or the patterns of interaction between teachers and students (Oktavia et al., 2025; Putri et al., 2024;

Rahawarin et al., 2023). General subject matter is also integrated with spiritual dimensions; for example, teachers link learning topics to verses from the Quran or explore moral lessons from each subject. In addition, religious practices such as the *dhuba* prayer, *zikr*, and recitation of *Al-Ma'tsurat* are part of the students' daily routines (Ahmad, 2017).

Based on the data analysis, three main factors were identified behind parents' decisions to enroll their children in Islamic Elementary Schools: theological, sociological, and academic factors, which will be discussed in detail in the following section.

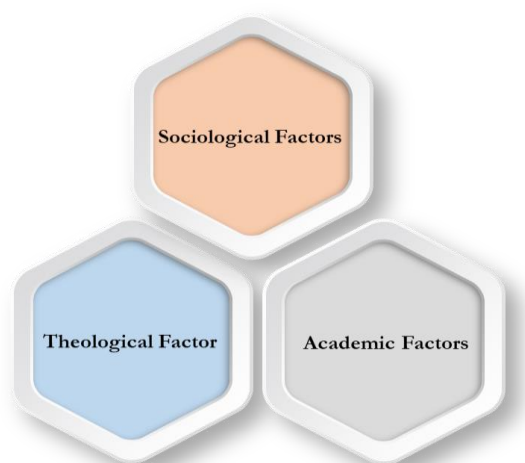


Fig. Parents' perspectives & reasons

Theological Factor

The main consideration for parents in choosing education for their children is the religious aspect. Theological factors are the most dominant reason for parents who enroll their children in Islamic Elementary Schools compared to other factors. Indicators of this factor can be seen from parents' desire for their children to become pious individuals, be able to read and memorize the Quran, and perform religious worship properly. This was revealed through the researcher's interviews with several informants. One parent stated:

...From the beginning, the Integrated Islamic Elementary School was my first choice for my children's education because of religious considerations. So the first thing I took into account was religion. If the school's religious foundation is good, I will choose it; if not, even if the academic achievement is high, I won't. Alhamdulillah, I chose Buah Hati Padang because it was also affordable (informant).

From this statement, it can be understood that the main consideration for parents is the quality of religious education offered by the school. Parents perceive that Islamic Elementary Schools have a strong religious foundation and can help nurture their children into pious individuals (Nasril et al., 2023; Yuslia et al., 2021). Similar reasons were expressed by other informants who believed that their children's experiences at school had a positive influence on their religious behavior at home:

...I was amazed when my son reminded me to pray when I forgot. He told me that not praying is a major sin. I am proud that, at the elementary school age, my child already understands that. I am also interested in continuing my children's education here because I no longer need to give extra religious lessons at home (informant).

Another parent also stated:

...My child now understands how to pray properly and can read the Quran. That is the main reason I chose an Integrated Islamic Elementary School so that my children can have strong

religious knowledge (informant).

The findings indicate that religious education is the key factor influencing parents' decisions when selecting educational institutions. Religious motivation fostered within the family environment often creates positive interactions between parents and children, encouraging them to remind one another to live according to Islamic values.

In addition to its impact on children, the presence of Islamic Elementary Schools also positively influences parents' own religious development (Rohmat et al., 2024). Choosing Islamic-based educational institutions has been shown to increase spiritual awareness within families. Therefore, parents' decision to select Islamic Elementary Schools for theological reasons can be considered a rational choice, as these institutions place religious education as the highest priority in all school activities.

Sociological Factors

Sociological factors are also an important consideration for parents when choosing an Integrated Islamic Elementary School. This consideration relates to the extent to which educational institutions can fulfill their social functions, such as providing a good social status, promoting upward social mobility, and enhancing the family's prestige within society (Hasanah et al., 2022; Nugroho & Kristiawan, 2021). According to one informant, Islamic Elementary Schools in Indonesia have experienced a significant improvement in their public image compared to the past. Islamic schools are now viewed as educational institutions capable of contributing to national education, shifting the previous perception that quality education was only offered by non-Islamic institutions.

This phenomenon is also evident in Islamic Elementary Schools, whose image has become increasingly positive in the eyes of the public. One of the main attractions is the implementation of a full-day school system, in which the learning process extends from 07:00 to 16:00 WIB. This system enables the integration of general and religious curricula such as *tahsin* and *tahfidz al-Quran* while providing opportunities for students to directly practice the values they learn. One informant explained:

...I send my children to the Integrated Islamic Elementary School because of its full-day program. We work until late afternoon, so we need an institution that can take care of our children while instilling good values (informant).

The full-day school program provides benefits for families with busy schedules, as children can remain in a structured and supervised environment for longer periods. This is considered an effective way to prevent them from engaging in negative activities, such as excessive television watching or gadget use.

Another informant added:

...I chose the Integrated Islamic Elementary School because of its full-day system. My husband and I both work, so our children need to be in a safe and religious environment. At this school, we believe our child is being guided properly (informant).

Although the tuition fees at Islamic Elementary Schools are relatively higher than those at government-subsidized public schools or madrasahs, parents consider the costs proportional to the facilities, supervision, and quality of education provided. Consequently, these schools have become increasingly popular among middle-class families who seek a balance between general and religious education (Asril et al., 2023; Syarifuddin et al., 2023).

Academic Factors

Academic factors are also an important reason for parents when choosing an

Integrated Islamic Elementary School. These factors include the quality of teaching, teacher professionalism, academic achievement, and the availability of facilities and infrastructure that support teaching and learning activities. Several parents expressed positive impressions of the teachers' professionalism. One informant stated:

...My child was initially shy and had difficulty adapting. However, the teachers here are very friendly and patient, so my child eventually became enthusiastic about going to school (informant).

This shows that teachers at Islamic Elementary Schools not only act as instructors but also serve as companions, motivators, and parental figures at school. A warm and friendly approach helps children feel comfortable in the school environment. Another informant said:

...The teachers here really understand the world of children. My child often tells me about how the teacher behaves rather than about classroom lessons. He even feels sad if the teacher is absent due to illness (informant).

In addition to teacher quality, the academic success of graduates is also an important consideration. One parent stated:

...My first child graduated from here, and when he continued to a higher level, his achievements remained excellent. The knowledge gained at this Integrated Islamic Elementary School has been very influential (informant).

The findings indicate that character education, discipline, and learning quality at Islamic Elementary Schools have a positive impact on students' academic achievement and personal development. Teachers in these schools also fulfill the role of *murabbi* educators who not only deliver subject matter but also instill moral and Islamic values in students' daily lives (Arifai, 2018; Kasmar et al., 2019; Wahyuni & Rasyid, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and data analysis, it can be concluded that the Muslim community's interest in Islamic Elementary Schools is influenced by three main factors: theological, sociological, and academic. Theological factors relate to the religious orientation of parents who want their children to receive a strong religious education alongside general education. This expectation includes the desire for children to grow into individuals who have faith, possess noble character, are able to read and memorize the Quran, and perform religious practices correctly. Meanwhile, sociological factors reflect the changing public perception of Islamic education. Integrated Islamic Schools are now regarded as educational institutions capable of combining Islamic values with high academic standards while offering a full-day school system suited to the needs of modern families and the busy schedules of parents. The academic factors highlight that the quality of school management, teacher competence, and a supportive learning environment have increased public confidence that these institutions can produce graduates who are both academically excellent and possess strong Islamic character. These findings emphasize the importance of strengthening Islamic education at the primary level through the integration of religious values with the modern education system. Therefore, the future development of basic education institutions should consider a balance between spiritual, social, and academic dimensions to respond effectively to the increasingly diverse needs of Muslim communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to everyone who contributed to the

success of this research.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contribution

Mohd Isa Hamzah: Writing-Preparation of original manuscript, Conceptualization, Methodology, **Afifah Febriani:** Visualization, Improve Content, **Comfort Akinfolarin:** Data accuracy, Improve Language.

AI Statement

The data and language usage in this article have been validated and verified by English language experts and no AI-generated sentences are included in this article.

Funding Statement

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that this research was conducted without any conflict of interest in the research.

Ethical Clearance

The place or location studied has agreed to conduct research and is willing if the results of this study are published.

Publisher's and Journal's Note

Islamic Studies and Development Center Universitas Negeri Padang as the publisher and Editor of Khalifa: Journal of Islamic Education that there is no conflict of interest towards this article publication.

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Khalifa: Journal of Islamic Education

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