Reflections on Comparing Basic Education Systems in Indonesia: Analysis of Curricula and Learning Approaches in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Elementary education in Indonesia is characterized by diversity in approaches and curricula, influenced by social, cultural, and religious contexts. This study aims to compare the elementary education systems of public elementary schools, Islamic elementary schools, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, focusing on curriculum and teaching methods. Public elementary schools follow the 2013 National Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizing competency-based learning and a scientific approach, while Islamic elementary schools integrate Islamic values into these curricula, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah highlights formal religious content as the core of education. This study employs a literature review method to analyze the structural differences and pedagogical approaches across the three school types. Findings reveal that, despite shared basic structures, significant differences exist in the prioritization of religious content, teaching methods, and curriculum flexibility. The discussion underscores the implications of these differences for character development and the relevance of education in the modern era. This research concludes with a call for curriculum harmonization that supports pluralism and pedagogical innovation to enhance the quality of elementary education in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Reflection, Education, Elementary School, Islamic elementary school, Madrasah Ibtida'iyah*

A. Introduction

Elementary education in Indonesia serves as a foundational pillar in shaping the character and competencies of the younger generation. This system encompasses various institutions, including public elementary schools, Islamic elementary schools, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, each with unique characteristics influenced by Indonesia's social, cultural, and religious contexts. Public elementary schools are regulated by the Ministry of Education and Culture through the 2013 National Curriculum, designed to meet national competency standards with a scientific learning approach.(Dinana et al. 2024) The goal is to equip students with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and collaboration. However, this curriculum tends to place limited emphasis on religious aspects, except through specific subjects.

Islamic elementary schools,(Syah et al. 2011) as private religious-based institutions, adopt the 2013 Curriculum as their primary framework. These schools incorporate local content focused on Islamic values, including Islamic Religious Education and Al-Qur'an Hadith. This approach aims to balance academic education with character development rooted in religion, making Islamic elementary schools a preferred choice for families seeking a holistic education for their children. Integration of Islamic values occurs across subjects,(Bahri et al. 2024) such as linking science and social studies to religious contexts, reflecting an effort to produce academically competent yet religiously grounded students.(Khoir 2023) However, implementation depends on the capacity of teachers and available resources. Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, employs a curriculum that prominently features formal religious education. Subjects like Al-Qur'an, Fiqh, and Akidah Akhlak constitute 40-50% of the total learning time, aiming to instill a strong religious identity in students from an early age. Madrasah Ibtidaiyah is often the primary option in rural areas or conservative Muslim communities. However, the integration of general subjects like Mathematics and Science is often limited compared to public or Islamic elementary schools, posing challenges in meeting national competency standards.(Sopandi 2019)

The differences between public elementary schools, Islamic elementary schools, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah reflect the rich diversity of education in Indonesia, a country with the world's largest Muslim population. These institutions address this diversity by catering to specific local needs in distinct ways. Public elementary schools emphasize national education equality for all children, Islamic elementary schools bridge secular and religious education, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah preserve a strong Islamic educational tradition. Together, these approaches complement each other in maintaining educational harmony amid pluralism. However, limited research has comprehensively compared the curriculum and teaching methods across these three school types. Many studies focus on

evaluating the 2013 Curriculum or the challenges of religious education in isolation.(Mukminin et al. 2019) This research seeks to fill this gap with a comprehensive analysis, focusing on curriculum structure, content priorities, and teaching methods. It also explores the implications for character development within each institution.(Lestariningsih et al. 2024) This comparative approach is expected to provide fresh insights into the dynamics of elementary education in Indonesia.

Contextualizing education within cultural and religious frameworks is a strength of Indonesia's educational system. Public elementary schools provide a robust academic foundation for students from diverse backgrounds, while Islamic elementary schools offer an alternative that blends values without deviating from national standards. Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, conversely, upholds long-standing Islamic educational traditions. All three face similar challenges, such as limited infrastructure and teacher training, but their responses vary based on their respective identities. Globalization and the digital era add complexity to the elementary education system. Technology is increasingly vital in modern learning, including in public elementary schools, Islamic elementary schools, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Public elementary schools in urban areas tend to adopt technology faster due to better infrastructure support. Islamic elementary schools are beginning to use religion-based learning applications like digital Al-Qur'an tools, while Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, though slower, is exploring technology to support memorization and religious learning. This varied adoption highlights access disparities that require inclusive policy interventions. Character development remains a central focus in elementary education, though approaches differ. Public elementary schools emphasize nationalist character and independence through extracurricular activities, Islamic elementary schools integrate values like morality and honesty across subjects, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah focuses on building strong faith through daily religious discipline.(Maryam and Ari 2025) Each approach has strengths and weaknesses that need evaluation to create a more balanced educational system. This research will analyze how these methods influence student learning outcomes.

National education policies must be responsive to the diversity of educational institutions. The government has attempted to standardize quality through the 2013 Curriculum, but implementation remains uneven. Public elementary schools receive greater governmental support compared to Islamic elementary schools and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah,(Nadilah et al. 2025) which often rely on local communities for additional resources. This disparity raises questions about educational equity in Indonesia. This study will explore solutions to address these gaps through curriculum harmonization. Collaboration among institutions is key to improving elementary education quality. These entities can learn from each other to develop a more holistic approach. For instance,

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah could adopt the scientific methods of public elementary schools to enhance academic competence, while Islamic elementary schools could share experiences in value integration. This collaboration could also include cross-institutional teacher training to boost teaching capacity. Such an approach is expected to strengthen the overall education system.

Challenges in modern education also include preparing students for the global job market. Public elementary schools provide an academic foundation aligned with these needs, while Islamic elementary schools and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah must adapt their curricula to include modern skills without losing religious identity. This research will assess the extent to which these institutions are prepared for such challenges. The findings could inform policy recommendations supporting educational innovation, necessitating adaptive approaches to ensure future relevance. The role of local communities is crucial in supporting elementary education. Parents and community leaders often participate in managing Islamic elementary schools and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, providing financial resources,(Sun'an et al. 2025) moral guidance, and religious activities. Public elementary schools rely more on government budget allocations. Collaboration between communities and educational institutions can enhance learning effectiveness. This study will analyze the community's contribution to character development across the three school types.

Continuous evaluation is necessary to maintain elementary education quality. Evaluation data can guide curriculum and teaching method adjustments.(Cahya et al. 2024) Public elementary schools have a more structured evaluation system compared to Islamic elementary schools and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. However, all three need to adopt evidence-based approaches for decision-making. This research will propose a widely applicable evaluation framework, helping identify each system's strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, this study aims to provide practical contributions to the development of elementary education in Indonesia. By understanding curriculum and teaching method differences, solutions supporting pluralism can be identified. The findings are relevant for policymakers, educators, and the education community. The comparative approach used will offer deep insights into elementary education dynamics, serving as a starting point for further research in this field.

B. Methods

This research employs a literature review method to collect and analyze secondary data from relevant sources.(Creswell and Creswell 2017) Data were gathered from official documents such as the 2013 Curriculum, religious education guidelines from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, academic journals, education textbooks, and studies on Indonesia's elementary education system. The analysis process involved identifying key themes, including curriculum structure, This study uses a qualitative approach to the method of literature review (library research). The selection of this method is based on research objectives that focus on analysis and critical reflection on the basic education system in Indonesia, especially in comparing curricula and learning approaches applied in elementary schools (SD) and Madrasah Ibtida'iyah (MI). The research is designed as a descriptive-comparative study, with a reflective approach to official documents and scientific studies. The aim is to describe the characteristics of the curriculum and learning approaches in SD and MI, and then compare them systematically based on the relevant literature. The selection of this design aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of curriculum implementation at the basic education level, as well as to explore the differences and similarities of approaches used in the learning process between SD and MI. This method is considered appropriate because the main source of data comes from curriculum documents (such as curriculum 2013 and curriculum Merdeka), government regulations, and the results of previous research. The research steps include: Identify the topic and focus of research;Collection of literary sources such as books, journals, articles, and education policy documents; Selection and classification of documents based on the relevance and appropriateness of the topic; Content analysis of the collected documents; Reflection and synthesis of analysis results in comparative form. Sources of data in this study consist of: National curriculum document (curriculum 2013 and independent curriculum), Madrasah curriculum document from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Relevant academic books, Scientific articles from national and international journals discussing basic education, Government regulations related to the basic education system.

The main instrument in this study is the document analysis sheet, which is used to identify key aspects in the curriculum and learning approach. This instrument is designed to capture data about: Educational goals, Curriculum structure, Recommended learning methods, Assessment of learning outcomes. The analysis techniques used are content analysis and comparative analysis. The analysis was conducted by reading in depth (close reading) of texts and documents, identifying the main themes, and then comparing the basic education system in SD and MI, especially in aspects of curriculum

and learning approaches. The results of the analysis are then reflected to produce a more holistic understanding of the strengths and challenges of each system.

C. Result and Discussion

The curriculum structure of public elementary schools fully aligns with the 2013 Curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture. It includes mandatory subjects like Mathematics, Indonesian Language, Science, Social Studies, Arts, and Physical Education. A competency- and character-based learning approach is central, aiming to meet national standards. Religious Education and Character Development (PABP) is provided for all religions, but its content is general and not in-depth. Curriculum flexibility is limited due to national guidelines, sometimes hindering local adaptations, reflecting a focus on educational uniformity across Indonesia. Islamic elementary schools adopt the 2013 Curriculum as a base framework, supplemented with local content emphasizing Islamic values. Subjects like Islamic Religious Education (PAI), Akidah Akhlak, and Al-Qur'an Hadith are added, comprising 20-30% of total lesson hours. Islamic values are integrated contextually, such as linking Science to Allah's creation. This curriculum offers greater flexibility than public elementary schools, though its implementation depends on school policies and the availability of competent teachers.(Prakoso et al. 2023) The added religious content enhances students' religious character but may burden the learning schedule.

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah uses a curriculum developed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, with a primary focus on formal religious education. Religious subjects like Al-Qur'an, Fiqh, and Akidah Akhlak dominate, accounting for 40-50% of the curriculum. General subjects like Mathematics and Science are adapted to support religious learning rather than being the main focus. Madrasah Ibtidaiyah enjoys greater curriculum flexibility due to autonomy in adjusting local content. However, resource limitations often hinder the development of students' non-religious academic skills, reinforcing its identity as an Islamic educational institution. Content priorities in public elementary schools are oriented toward mastering core competencies and basic skills. The focus is on critical thinking, collaboration, and literacy skills suited to 21st-century needs. Religious content is delivered through PABP with limited duration, sometimes lacking relevance for students from specific religious backgrounds. This reflects a secular approach emphasizing educational equality without prioritizing religious identity, leaving spiritual character development to family and community environments outside school.

Islamic elementary schools prioritize integrating Islamic values across all subjects. For example, Social Studies may include Islamic history case studies, while Science connects to religious contexts. This approach aims to balance academic

competence with religious character development. However, the quality of integration depends on teachers' ability to design relevant materials. Poor management of added religious content can reduce time for core subjects, potentially affecting academic performance. Madrasah Ibtidaiyah prioritizes formal religious content as the curriculum's core. Memorizing the Al-Qur'an and understanding Fiqh are key success indicators. General subjects like Mathematics and Indonesian are tailored to support religious learning rather than as primary goals. This approach produces students with a strong religious identity but often leaves them less competitive in national or global exams compared to public or Islamic elementary school students. This gap highlights the need to strengthen academic skills in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah without sacrificing its religious focus.

Teaching methods in public elementary schools adopt a scientific approach, including observing, questioning, experimenting, associating, and communicating. This is supported by simple laboratories, projectors, and interactive learning media. The method fosters student independence and creativity, aligning with the 2013 Curriculum's goals. However, success depends on infrastructure availability and teacher training, which are often limited in remote areas, creating disparities in learning quality across regions.(Dinana et al. 2024). Islamic elementary schools combine the scientific approach with value-based methods. Group discussions based on the Al-Qur'an or moral simulations in Social Studies are examples. This method aims to integrate academic learning with Islamic values, with teachers often using religious stories as teaching aids to boost motivation. However, its effectiveness relies on teachers' ability to balance both approaches, which can be challenging without additional training.

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah tends to use traditional methods like lectures, memorization, and kitab kuning-based learning. These are effective for delivering religious content but less conducive to critical thinking skills. Some modern Madrasah Ibtidaiyah are adopting technology, such as digital Al-Qur'an applications, to support memorization. However, technology adoption remains limited by inadequate infrastructure and insufficient teacher training, indicating a need for pedagogical innovation to enhance relevance in the digital era.The implications for character development in public elementary schools produce students with nationalist character and critical thinking skills.(Artiles and Kozleski 2016) This approach supports independence and global adaptation but may leave students disconnected from spiritual values due to the lack of religious focus.(Dewi et al. 2024) Character development thus depends on varying family environments, suggesting a need for additional support outside school hours. Islamic elementary schools produce students with a balanced religious and academic integrity. This approach promotes pluralism by teaching tolerance through Islamic values, enabling students to appreciate diversity while

retaining religious identity. However, an overloaded curriculum can cause stress, especially if teachers are inadequately trained. Effective time and resource management are critical to this approach's success. Madrasah Ibtidaiyah produces students with strong religious competence through daily disciplines like congregational prayers. This fosters obedient and humble character, aligning with Islamic education goals. However, limited academic competence may hinder competitiveness at national or global levels. Madrasah Ibtidaiyah students need opportunities to develop non-academic skills, such as technology, to enhance their competitiveness. Key challenges include infrastructure disparities between urban and rural areas. Public elementary schools in cities have better technology access than Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in rural regions. Teacher training is also a critical issue,(Suttrisno and Yulia 2022) particularly in Islamic elementary schools and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, which require dual expertise. Curriculum harmonization across the three institutions remains difficult due to differing priorities, necessitating coordinated policy interventions to achieve equity.

Opportunities lie in integrating technology to improve learning quality. Collaboration among institutions can facilitate resource and experience sharing. Public elementary schools can assist Madrasah Ibtidaiyah with infrastructure, while Madrasah Ibtidaiyah can share religious methods with Islamic elementary schools. This approach could create an inclusive and adaptive education system. Further research is needed to measure the effectiveness of this collaboration in local contexts. Finally, these findings highlight the need for a holistic approach combining the strengths of all three systems. Curriculum harmonization must support pluralism without compromising each institution's identity. Cross-disciplinary teacher training and infrastructure investment are essential steps. This discussion affirms that elementary education in Indonesia can serve as an inclusivity model if well-managed.

D. Conclusion

This study confirms that public elementary schools, Islamic elementary schools, and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah exhibit significant structural and pedagogical differences in their curricula and teaching methods. Public elementary schools offer a uniform national approach, Islamic elementary schools balance religion and academics, while Madrasah Ibtidaiyah emphasize formal religious education. These differences reflect Indonesia's educational diversity but also pose challenges in achieving equity and global relevance. Curriculum harmonization supporting pluralism, intensive teacher training, and infrastructure investment are necessary to enhance elementary education quality. This research recommends inter-institutional collaboration and pedagogical innovation to create an adaptive and inclusive education system. Madrasah Ibtida'iyah (MI), shows that

although both are in one national system of education, there are significant differences in curriculum emphasis and learning approaches applied. Primary schools emphasize the mastery of general academic competencies, while Madrasah Ibtidaiyah integrates Islamic religious education more deeply into its curriculum structure. The Merdeka curriculum that is currently being implemented provides space for a more contextual, differentiated, and learner-centered approach to learning. However, challenges in its implementation are still felt in various education units, such as teacher resource gaps, limited facilities, and uneven understanding of the essence of the curriculum. From this comparison, it can be concluded that the strengthening of character, the development of 21st century competencies, and the integration of spiritual and moral values need to be mainstreamed in the basic education system. Collaboration between the national curriculum approach and local religious wisdom such as those in MI has great potential in forming a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also spiritually and socially mature.

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