

Challenges in Implementing Values-Based Education: A Qualitative Study at Sekolah Terpadu Musa-Asiah (Sepama), Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

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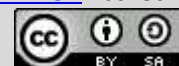
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This qualitative study explores the challenges of implementing values-based education in Sekolah Terpadu Musa-Asiah (Sepama), an integrated Islamic elementary school in Svay Khleang Village, Kroch Chmar District, Thbong Khmum Province, Cambodia. Using observation and interviews with teachers, school leaders, and parents, the study identifies difficulties in aligning the national Cambodian curriculum with Islamic values, teacher preparedness limitations, and student adaptation constraints. This research integrates literature reviews and presents a conceptual framework that illustrates the dual influence of national and religious curricula on classroom practices. The findings are organized into three key themes: curriculum integration, pedagogical implementation, and socio-cultural barriers. Tables are included to highlight data patterns and thematic insights. The study provides strategic recommendations to improve the synergy between moral instruction and academic goals in post-conflict educational settings.

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Introduction

In the post-Pol Pot era, Cambodia has experienced a dramatic educational transformation with the rise of diverse school systems, including national, religious, and integrated institutions [1],[2]. The Pol Pot regime had systematically dismantled formal education structures, viewing them as remnants of elitism and colonialism. Education became crucial for national recovery and reconciliation as the country slowly rebuilt. This transformation has been particularly nuanced in Muslim-majority villages such as Svay Khleang, located in the Kroch Chmar District of Thbong Khmum Province. Communities have sought to balance religious identity with civic integration, resulting in integrated Islamic schools that combine Cambodia's national curriculum with Islamic religious teachings [3]-[5]. These schools are not only sites of academic instruction but also serve as institutions of moral formation, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. One such institution is Sekolah Terpadu Musa-Asiah (Sepama), which opened on October 1, 2012, with 47 students in its inaugural first-grade class. Its establishment represents a community-led initiative to provide holistic education that is academically rigorous and spiritually grounded.

Values-based education (VbE) plays a pivotal role in this context, aiming to foster not only academic excellence but also moral development, critical thinking, empathy, and social responsibility among learners [6], [7]. In Cambodia's pluralistic and post-conflict landscape, VbE becomes even more essential for nurturing ethically grounded citizens tolerant of diversity. However, in practice, values-based education often encounters significant implementation barriers. One persistent challenge lies in reconciling secular academic goals, usually driven by global competencies and performance metrics, with local communities' sincerely held religious or cultural values [8], [9]. This tension is particularly pronounced in integrated Islamic schools, where the demand to meet national education standards may sometimes conflict with the imperative to preserve and transmit Islamic ethics and worldview. Additionally, values education cannot be reduced to the transmission of fixed doctrines; it must instead engage students in reflective processes that help them internalize ethical principles and apply them in complex real-world situations. This study explores these tensions at Sepama and analyzes how school stakeholders (including teachers, students, and parents) interpret, negotiate, and embody values in their daily educational practices.

The relevance of values education in such settings also intersects with the broader goal of inclusive education, which promotes access, equity, and participation for all learners regardless of background. Inclusive education not only entails the physical integration of students but also emphasizes cognitive and affective inclusion, ensuring that all students feel respected and valued. In the case of Sepama, inclusion involves navigating the intersection

between national and religious identities and creating a classroom culture that accommodates diversity within unity. Existing literature on values education underscores its context-dependency, particularly in multicultural, multilingual, and post-conflict societies where moral education is deeply intertwined with historical trauma and efforts at peacebuilding [10]-[12]. In such environments, values education is not merely a pedagogical tool but a moral imperative contributing to social reconstruction, reconciliation, and national integration. Despite the growing interest in values-based and inclusive education, few empirical studies have explicitly focused on integrated Islamic schools in Cambodia. This research addresses that critical gap using a qualitative approach grounded in rich field observations and in-depth interviews with teachers, school leaders, and parents. Through this lens, the study offers insight into how moral and ethical values are cultivated, contested, and recontextualized within an educational ecosystem shaped by national imperatives and religious commitments.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study approach, combining direct observation of classroom activities and semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers, two school administrators, and six parents at Sepama. Thematic analysis was used to categorize data into meaningful patterns [13], [14]. Sampling was carried out using the purposive sampling technique. The samples taken have criteria including good communication skills, competence, and a disciplined attitude at work.

Data collection was carried out using the interview technique. The interview guidelines were prepared based on the primary focus of the research variable, namely the challenge of implementing value-based education. Before the interview instrument is used, it is first examined by an expert. Criterion experts have active experience in research and publication in teaching and student character development. After the data is collected, the applied data analysis consists of the data reduction stage, data presentation, and conclusion.

The conceptual framework posits that values-based education at Sepama emerges from the intersection of the Cambodian national and Islamic curricula, influencing classroom practices. This dual structure creates opportunities for holistic development and potential conflicts in value priorities. The framework highlights how integrated curriculum planning and cultural responsiveness must converge to ensure effective values transmission [15], [16].

Results and Discussion

A. Curriculum Integration Challenges

Teachers reported considerable difficulty synchronizing the national Cambodian curriculum with the Islamic curriculum, particularly in civic education, biology, and social studies. These subjects often present content from differing epistemological and ontological

assumptions, creating tension in instructional delivery [17], [18]. For instance, the national curriculum emphasizes secular civic duties, constitutional values, and human rights framed within a modern nation-state ideology. In contrast, the Islamic curriculum emphasizes loyalty to religious identity, ummah solidarity, and scriptural interpretations of social responsibility. While not inherently contradictory, these differences require careful pedagogical navigation to avoid confusing students or diluting either set of values.

Time allocation also emerged as a significant constraint. Given the packed academic calendar and strict assessment schedules from the Ministry of Education, teachers often struggle to deliver both curricula equally. This problem is especially pronounced in Sepama, where instructors cover content in two languages (Khmer and Arabic) and prepare students for national examinations and internal religious assessments.

As one grade five teacher explained during the interview,

"I feel like I'm always racing against the clock. I want to explain the story of Prophet Yusuf when we talk about moral choices, but the national curriculum says I must teach about the Constitution this week. It's tough to blend the two."

This sentiment was echoed by the school principal, who noted,

"We want to raise children who love their country and their religion. However, textbooks do not help us with integration. They are designed as if our school model doesn't exist. We often have to improvise."

This improvisation, while commendable, leads to inconsistent delivery of both curricula, which can impact student comprehension and ethical development. Teachers must often choose between teaching for national assessment and nurturing moral development, frequently leaving them feeling conflicted.

The absence of a standardized framework for integrated Islamic schools in Cambodia further exacerbates the complexity of curriculum alignment. Cambodia's policy landscape remains fragmented, unlike some countries that have developed national guidelines for integrating religious and secular curricula. According to a parent interviewed during a school meeting,

"Sometimes my child comes home confused. In science, he learns that humans evolved over millions of years. But in religion class, he learns about Adam and Hawa as our first parents. He asks, which one is true? I don't know how to answer."

This illustrates how curriculum misalignment can affect classroom learning, family conversations, and religious identity formation.

Such dilemmas are not unique to Sepama. Studies across Southeast Asia have shown that integrated schools often face tensions when attempting to harmonize different systems of knowledge [17], [18]. However, the stakes are even higher in a post-conflict society like Cambodia (where education is also expected to play a role in reconciliation and nation-

building). Failing to integrate values coherently may weaken moral authority and academic rigor, leaving students without a clear ethical compass or sufficient preparation for national exams. The situation calls for an urgent reevaluation of curriculum design, teacher support systems, and national education policy, ensuring they are responsive to the needs of religious minority schools striving to contribute meaningfully to both civic life and spiritual growth. Table 1 presents several issues related to integration in the curriculum.

Table 1. Curriculum Integration Conflicts

Issue	National Curriculum Focus	Islamic Curriculum Concern
Gender roles	Gender equality	Traditional gender roles
Evolution content	Scientific explanation	Religious creationism
Civic duty	National loyalty	Ummah solidarity
History perspective	Khmer historical events	Islamic civilizational narratives
Language of instruction	Khmer	Arabic/Islamic terminologies

Multiple teachers suggested an integrative curriculum framework to guide value alignment [19], [20].

B. Pedagogical and Assessment Dilemmas

Observed lessons at Sepama revealed inconsistent pedagogical strategies across different grade levels and subjects. While some teachers made commendable efforts to integrate ethical discussions into their lessons, others defaulted to conventional lecture-based delivery focused solely on content memorization. This inconsistency stemmed partly from varying levels of teacher training and uncertainty about balancing knowledge transmission with moral engagement [21] appropriately, [22]. In particular, teachers appeared confident when delivering factual content aligned with textbooks but expressed hesitation or discomfort when addressing complex moral dilemmas or value-laden scenarios in the classroom.

For example, during a civics lesson observed in a fourth-grade classroom, the teacher explained the functions of the Cambodian government but omitted opportunities to connect this knowledge with Islamic principles of leadership, justice, or social responsibility. When interviewed later, the teacher reflected:

"I was not trained to teach values through civics. I just focus on the exam topics. If I go into religion, I'm afraid I'll confuse the students or go off-topic."

This reflects a widespread concern among staff regarding the boundaries between religious education and secular instruction, a tension that often limits the scope of values-based engagement.

A similar issue emerged in science classes, where ethical questions around environmental stewardship, human life, or technological responsibility were rarely explored. Lessons were often linear, focused on covering chapters quickly in preparation for national assessments. A teacher of natural sciences explained,

"I know that Islam teaches us to care for the environment. But I don't always connect it to the Qur'an or hadith when I teach about pollution or global warming. I don't have enough time to explore that in detail."

Such missed opportunities for moral linkage suggest that pedagogical integration of values is more of an exception than the norm.

One of the most significant challenges identified was in the area of assessment. Students were primarily evaluated using rote-based written tests, particularly in subjects aligned with the national curriculum. These tests prioritized factual recall over critical thinking, ethical reflection, or emotional maturity. As a result, students who may have internalized positive moral values through discussions, storytelling, or lived practice were not adequately recognized or rewarded within the formal assessment system. According to the school principal,

"There is no exam for sincerity or compassion. The Ministry only checks scores in math, Khmer, and science. But we still want to raise good people, not just smart students."

This quote underscores a systemic disconnect between educational objectives and the tools used to evaluate success.

Indeed, research consistently warns that when assessments are not aligned with the goals of values education, they can undermine rather than support moral development [21], [22]. Schools may unintentionally prioritize what is easily measurable (grades, rankings, and pass rates) over what is meaningful but intangible: honesty, empathy, or civic responsibility. In Sepama, this tension is particularly acute, given the dual curriculum mandate and the community's expectation for students to be both academically competent and morally upright.

Some teachers have attempted to introduce alternative assessment methods, such as group projects, reflective journals, or behavioral observations, particularly in Islamic studies. However, these efforts remain isolated and are not yet institutionalized across subjects or grade levels. A few parents also voiced concern that the school did not adequately measure character development. As one parent of a third-grade student put it,

"My son knows many hadiths and prayers, but I want to know if he's applying them. Is he honest? Is he kind to others? We don't see a report card for that."

This highlights the broader need for values-based assessment frameworks beyond conventional metrics, including behavioral indicators and emotional intelligence.

In summary, the current pedagogical and assessment approaches at Sepama reflect a transition school that aspires to nurture whole-child development but is constrained by traditional instructional models, exam pressures, and policy gaps. Addressing these limitations will require sustained professional development for teachers, systemic reform in assessment policies, and developing culturally responsive tools that honor academic standards and

spiritual goals. Without such reforms, the promise of values-based education risks being reduced to rhetoric rather than realized in practice. Based on these conditions, Table 2 will assess pedagogical strategies that can be used as a real solution.

Table 2. Pedagogical Strategy Assessment

Teaching Practice	Frequency Observed	Value-Oriented Outcome
Lecture-based instruction	High	Low
Storytelling	Medium	Medium
Role-playing	Low	High
Group discussion	Medium	Medium
Peer teaching	Low	High

These results confirm that student-centered pedagogies enhance moral development but require intensive teacher training [23], [24].

C. Sociocultural and Parental Influence

The interviews with parents, guardians, and community leaders revealed that families in the Svay Khleang village hold diverse interpretations of the concept of "values," shaped significantly by their religious knowledge, generational experiences, and socio-economic backgrounds. While a shared cultural foundation is rooted in Islam, how moral and ethical values are prioritized and expressed varies widely across households. This diversity has occasionally led to misalignment between the values taught at school and those reinforced at home, creating confusion or inconsistency in students' moral development [25], [26].

For instance, in some households, especially those led by elder family members with traditional religious education, values such as obedience, modesty, and ritual adherence are emphasized with rigid expectations. In contrast, the school's interpretation of Islamic values often includes a more holistic and developmental perspective, emphasizing internal intention (*niyyah*), moral reasoning, and social ethics alongside religious practice. As a result, children may receive contradictory messages about what it means to be a "good" Muslim. A parent of a second-grade student shared during an interview,

"At home, we tell our children never to question adults. However, the teacher encourages them to question and think critically in school. I am not sure which one is right."

This tension reflects a broader generational shift in educational philosophy. While older generations tend to equate values with obedience, silence, and conformity, younger educators, many of whom have been trained in modern pedagogy, promote participation, reflection, and empathy. One teacher of Islamic studies remarked,

"Parents want us to teach discipline through fear. But we try to teach values through love and dialogue. Sometimes they think we're being too soft."

This illustrates the delicate balance schools must strike in respecting cultural expectations while advancing contemporary models of child-centered moral education.

Socio-economic factors also play a significant role in shaping value perceptions. Families with greater access to higher education or who have lived abroad, particularly in Malaysia or the Middle East, tend to support the school's integrated model and progressive value education. In contrast, families who rely heavily on traditional community norms may view some aspects of the national curriculum, such as gender equality or democratic citizenship, with suspicion or discomfort. A school administrator noted,

"When we teach girls about their rights and roles in society, some parents feel uncomfortable. They ask, Why are we teaching this in an Islamic school?"

Religious literacy is another important factor. While many families are deeply committed to Islamic teachings, their knowledge of the Qur'an and hadith may be limited to oral traditions or selective interpretations. This creates a gap between the school's formal religious instruction and informal home-based religious practices, which are often passed down without critical reflection. One female parent admitted,

"I only studied in a pondok school, and we never questioned what the ustadz said. But now my daughter asks me questions about everything she learns. Sometimes I don't know the answers."

This indicates a need for parental support programs that can bridge the divide between home values and school teachings.

Moreover, the interviews highlighted that families often understand ethical behavior in functional terms, such as respecting elders, attending prayers, or wearing modest clothing, without necessarily delving into the ethical reasoning or spiritual intent behind these actions. This contrasts with the school's aim to cultivate external compliance, deep moral consciousness, and character development. According to research, this divergence is standard in communities undergoing educational transformation, where institutions seek to reshape values in alignment with modern, inclusive, and dialogical pedagogies. At the same time, traditional authority structures remain influential at home [25], [26].

In response to these dynamics, the school has involved families more actively in moral education efforts. Parent-teacher meetings now include discussions on values and ethics, and teachers frequently use WhatsApp groups to share weekly themes or moral stories covered in class. Still, these efforts are not yet systematic or sustained, and further investment is needed to ensure consistent value reinforcement between the school and home environments.

Ultimately, the study confirms that values-based education cannot operate in isolation. The success of moral instruction depends not only on school curricula and teacher competency but also on community engagement and cultural dialogue. Addressing the misalignments between

school values and home practices requires intentional, respectful, and culturally sensitive strategies that honor family traditions while introducing reflective, inclusive moral frameworks suited for a pluralistic society. Table 3 presents a design of the alignment of values between parents and schools that aligns with the concept of value-based education.

Table 3. Parent-School Value Alignment

Value Domain	Parent Emphasis	School Emphasis
Discipline	Obedience	Self-regulation
Prayer	Ritual correctness	Intentionality
Respect	Elders and parents	All humans equally
Modesty	Dress-focused	Attitude and interaction
Honesty	Religious obligation	Social responsibility

These sociocultural differences suggest the need for dialogic parent engagement strategies rather than prescriptive [27], [28].

Conclusions

Implementing values-based education in integrated schools like Sepama entails navigating multiple tensions between national goals, religious teachings, and community expectations. This study identified three key areas of challenge: curriculum integration, pedagogical practices, and sociocultural influences. Future research should explore cross-school collaborations and the development of shared pedagogical frameworks. A participatory, culturally grounded approach will be essential for effective and meaningful values education in Cambodia and similar post-conflict settings.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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