The Concept of Integrated Islamic Schools in the 21st Century: An Understanding among School Leaders in Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, Indonesia

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Abstract

The main objective of the current study is to explore the understandings of school leaders in Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) about the concept of integrated Islamic schools in the present day. Using a qualitative case study approach, 10 school leaders from PMDG were interviewed. They included six school leaders, three senior teachers, and one senior staff who have important roles at PMDG and involve directly in students' activities. Based on a thematic analysis, the findings revealed five main themes, namely (1) combining Islamic and modern education, (2) building school and community relationships, (3) integrating theory and practice, (4) producing open-minded persons, and (5) producing future education leaders. This study concludes that Indonesian Islamic schools combine pedagogy of learning based on Islamic principles and worldwide values. In terms of leadership and capacity building, a new strategy is enforced to produce well-balanced human beings for the success of both religious and worldly affairs.

Keywords: Integrated Islamic School, 21st Century, School Leaders, Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

From the Islamic perspective, educational institutions are the basis for creating good characters for future leaders. The existence of Islamic educational institutions is important as a blueprint for the future of the Islamic generation and Islamic society (Abidin, 2015). More importantly, high-performance educational institutions with strategic vision and mission are needed in responding to the 21st century challenges. Thus, Islamic school management views the concept of leadership as an ability to see beyond assumed boundaries and come up with solutions to the problems in the community as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad SAW (Ahmad et al., 2012; Beekun & Badawi, 1999).

A visionary leader brings strong influences to the management of the school. Especially for Islamic education institutions, visionary leaders energize, focus, and direct their followers in efforts to integrate school activities and management. Good Islamic educational management is crucial in responding to the challenges of the 21st century. Some of the characters in management development and the educational community that a leader should possess are the principles of transparency, openness, consultation, and deep understanding of the vision and mission (Sidek, 2013; Suzana & Sazali, 2013).

Specifically, in the case of Indonesia, there are some challenges in improving the quality of education in the 21ˢᵗ century. Even though the government of Indonesia has set educational priorities in three main areas i.e., cultivating access, improving quality, and strengthening accountability, various obstacles remain at large. According to Firman and Tola (2018), the problems are found due to limited learning facilities, inadequate teachers' quality and quantity, and limited education budget.

In order to respond to 21ˢᵗ century challenges, Islamic schools in Indonesia are moving towards the integration of religious and general subjects. However, Islamic schools maintain their Islamic vision, structure, and strategy in their educational process (Abidin, 2015). Using an integrated approach, Indonesian Islamic schools combine pedagogy of learning based on Islamic principles and worldwide values. The school leadership capacity building is improved to be able to compete with other schools globally. It also reinforces a new strategy to produce well-balanced human beings for the success of both religious and worldly affairs.

Hence, the main objective of the current study is to explore the understandings of the integrated Islamic school concept as perceived by school leaders in terms of vision, structure, and strategy at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG), Indonesia. Based on the findings, relevant recommendations are provided for the government and school leaders to successfully manage the integrated Islamic schools and produce human beings who can widely contribute to the world society and can better face 21ˢᵗ century challenges.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, the education system in Indonesia is dualistic separating public from religious schooling. However, some schools integrate both public and religious schools as an alternative. Mostly, these alternatives are included in the traditional system of schooling such as Pondok Pesantren and Madrasah. This kind of integrated Islamic education transforms its values and vision, culture and climate, and structure and system to be in line with modern development without leaving its religious values (Abidin, 2015).

Pondok Pesantren, in particular, is a type of integrated Islamic boarding school. Normally, it is run and owned by individual religious scholars known as *kyai*. The main subjects taught at Pondok Pesantren are Islamic subjects based on classical books (*kitab kuning*). Over the past 20 years, many Pondok Pesantren have included general subjects in the curriculum as an effort toward integrating the knowledge (Bahroni, 2014; 2010).

2.1   Leading Towards Integrated Islamic Schools

Integrated Islamic schools combine the curriculum of religious education and general education. It emphasizes the integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in its learning methods. In a broader context, the concept of integrated Islamic schools means involving teachers, parents, and the community to foster students' characters and competencies (Asnawati, 2019). For the past centuries, Islamic boarding schools have contributed to the development of Indonesia by producing leaders who are socially and morally balanced in their words and actions (Ilyasin, 2020).

According to Sidek (2013), the basis of integrated Islamic schools is Al-Qur'an. Its main objectives are to develop good characters (*akhlaq*), strong belief (*aqidah*), and a proper way of worship (*ibadah*). These subjects are considered important as Muslims are also facing contemporary technological challenges. Even though technology is significant for the improvement of education in the modern era, the Internet and social media have made

students deviate from Islamic values. Thus, Muslim leaders should develop a plan for education that can strategically address the 21ˢᵗ century challenges.

For that reason, a strategic leader should plan and anticipate the future of educational institutions by envisioning and initiating changes that correspond to the 21ˢᵗ century challenges. More specifically, integrated Islamic schools need good leadership to empower the institutions and promote good images of the schools (Bush, 2007). Hence, specific strategies should be established to lead an integrated Islamic school.

According to Caldwell and Spinks (1992), there are several actions a school leader should do in responding to the 21ˢᵗ century challenges. The authors stated that a school leader should be up to date with the current trends and issues, and aware of the national and international opportunities in the school environment. In particular, a school leader should anticipate the impacts of social trends on education and the school society. More importantly, a school leader should ensure the availability of strategic planning in responding to the challenges of the 21ˢᵗ century.

Hence, the current study tries to understand the concept of integrated Islamic schools from a leadership perspective to improve the productivity of Islamic schools. By doing so, Islamic schools can set priorities and formulate strategies for school improvement. Only then the leaders of Islamic schools in Indonesia could be successful in leading the present generation towards the attainment of their ultimate goal in responding to the 21ˢᵗ century challenges.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The current study used a qualitative approach by taking into account informants' points of views and interpretations of meanings about the concept of integrated Islamic schools. As explained by Creswell (2008), qualitative research explores the understanding of meaning from individuals or groups to look at social phenomena around them. This qualitative case study specifically explores the vision, structure, and strategy of Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG), Indonesia, in responding to the 21ˢᵗ century challenges.

3.1 Research Design

The data collection method used in this study was the interview. It is considered the most appropriate approach for this study as it gathers detailed information from the participants in order to do the qualitative analysis. To increase the quality of the data, the researchers asked for necessary clarifications from the participants and made interpretations based on their answers.

The interview could be structured or semi-structured (Fitzpartrick & Boulton, 1994). The current study employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews because the researchers have identified the issues to be discussed. This allowed participants to describe their points of views in managing integrated Islamic schools to respond to the challenges of the 21ˢᵗ century.

3.2 Participants

This study chose six school leaders, three senior teachers, and one senior staff from Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) in Indonesia as the informants. PMDG was chosen because it has produced many alumni who have contributed to the community and the country. One of PMDG's visions is to produce strong leaders, have Islamic morals, and broad knowledge in religion and worldly matters.

With the motto "ready to lead and ready to be led" (*siap memimpin dan siap dipimpin*), PMDG has showed its effective methods of education and training (Ramdhani, 2017). In addition, PMDG was given the title 'modern' since the early 20th century due to its distinctive nature combining traditional and modern school systems (Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 2020).

Table 1 shows that all of the informants all males holding doctoral and master's degrees in education. Only two informants with bachelor's degrees. They hold important roles at PMDG as director, head of Pondok, and senior teacher/staff.

Specific codes were assigned to all informants to keep their confidentiality. The main criteria of choosing the informants are: (1) school leaders/senior teachers/staff who have the power and significant roles at PMDG; (2) five years of experiences of teaching and living in PMDG; and (3) involved directly in students' activities either intra-curricular or extra-curricular.

Table 1: Informants' Code and Background

Informant	Gender	Educational Background	Academic Position
Leader 1	Male	Master	Head of Pondok
Leader 2	Male	PhD	Senior Teacher
Leader 3	Male	PhD	Senior Teacher
Leader 4	Male	PhD	Senior Teacher
Leader 5	Male	PhD	Director
Leader 6	Male	Master	Head of Pondok
Leader 7	Male	Master	Senior Teacher
Leader 8	Male	Master	Senior Teacher
Leader 9	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Head of Pondok
Leader 10	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Senior Staff

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

In collecting the data, the interviews were audio-recorded. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The participants were allowed to speak in their own language i.e., Bahasa Indonesia. This approach was more appropriate since most of the participants were comfortable expressing their feelings, opinions, and perspectives about the topic under study in their own language.

The recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed based on the main ideas from the transcripts. In order to obtain the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers employed a systematic analysis procedure by coding the transcripts to generate specific themes. The emerging themes were then classified in accordance with the research objectives.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the data, five themes emerged. They include *combining Islamic and modern education, building school and community relationship, integrating theory and practice, producing open-minded persons*, and *producing future education leaders* (Figure 1).
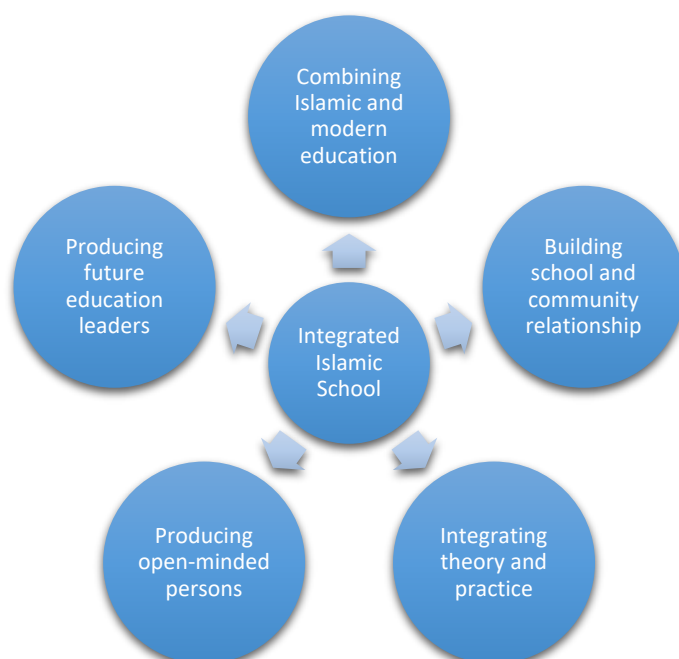
Figure 1: Themes for Integrated Islamic Schools

4.1 Combining Islamic and Modern Education

The conception of integrated Islamic school is perceived by most of the informants as combining Islamic and modern education. Specifically, it is a combination of traditional and modern knowledge (Leader-4). According to Leader-7, an integrated Islamic school combines revealed knowledge and general science knowledge. As one of the oldest Islamic education institutions, Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG) is known for its distinctive feature in Islamic revealed knowledge (Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 2020). As a modern type of school, PMDG also integrates various modern knowledge and subjects in its curriculum (Izfanna & Hisyam, 2012) from primary to secondary levels that meet the objectives of *Pondok Pesantren* as an Islamic education institution (Tan, 2014).

Almost similarly, some informants perceived the meaning of integrated school as a combination of boarding and formal school education (Leader-5). In this sense, an integrated Islamic school combines general subjects of knowledge and specialization of Islamic knowledge (*mutafaqquh fiddin*). This is as stated by Leader-1:

> *Gontor graduates must be religious scholars (*mutafaqquh fiddin*) who can deliver the messages of Islam rationally and argumentatively. They are expected to spread the messages and teachings of Islamic truth through the languages that people can understand (*bilisani qaumihi*). In the modern setting, this mission can only be achieved through a combination of knowledge communication and technology, such as the Internet.*

More specifically, PMDG has integrated three basic pillars consisting of Qur'anic values, Five Values (*Panca Jiwa*), and Five Plans (*Panca Jangka*). Panca Jiwa includes the values of sincerity (*jiwa keikhlasan*), simplicity (*jiwa kesederhanaan*), independence (*jiwa berdikari*), Islamic brotherhood (*jiwa ukhuwwah Islamiyah*), and freedom (*jiwa bebas*). While Panca Jangka consists of strategic plans for education and teaching (*pendidikan dan pengajaran*), regeneration (*kaderisasi*), infrastructure (*pergedungan*), resources (*chizanatullah*), and Pondok family welfare (*kesejahteraan keluarga Pondok*). Leader-4 described this unique concept of integration at PMDG:

> *As an Islamic education institution, Gontor has the same basic pillars as Islam which resourced from Qur'an and Sunnah. In addition to that, there are also two distinctive concepts known as*

Panca Jiwa (Five Values) and Panca Jangka *(Five Plans).* Panca Jiwa *is the five values that underlie the life of Gontor. All activities in the Gontor environment are based on values imbued with the atmosphere that can be summed up in* Panca Jiwa. *While* Panca Jangka *is the framework in developing Gontor as an educational institution. It is formulated as a working plan for Gontor to provide guidance and direction for the development of Gontor. On top of that, there is also a philosophy of keeping good things from the past and taking new things for improvement. This philosophy is based on an Arabic phrase* "al-muhafadzatu 'ala qadimissolih wal akhdzu bil jadidi ashlah". *These are more or less what we are trying to integrate and apply in Gontor.*

The main pillars of Islamic boarding schools are Al-Qur'an and Sunnah. However, PMDG is different from other Islamic education institutions in terms of the above-mentioned values and philosophy as explained by Leader-4. The three founders of PMDG, namely Ahmad Sahal, Zainuddin Fannani, and Imam Zarkasyi, formulated *Panca Jiwa* and *Panca* Jangka when they established the institution in 1926 at Ponorogo, Indonesia. These values represent the good moral conducts and attitudes of the people of PMDG (Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 2020).

Historically, PMDG was established based on the integration of traditional and modern knowledge. Previously, Islamic boarding schools are considered traditional because the institutions focus only on religion and revealed knowledge. Students at religious boarding schools have a limited understanding of modern and general knowledge such as biology and chemistry. Based on that phenomenon, the founders of PMDG proposed a new format of Islamic boarding schools combining traditional traditions and modern approaches especially in terms of teaching methodology using the technology (Abdullah Syukri Zarkasyi, 2005; 2011; 2012).

4.2   Building School and Community Relationship

The second theme shows that the concept of integrated Islamic school revolves around the idea of building school and community relationships. Leader 1, for instance, perceived the concept of school integration as building a good relationship between school and surrounding community. Specifically, he referred to the concept of integration at PMDG as promoting three education centres, which include school, family and community. In line with Leader 1's view, Leader 3 supported that the integration of three education centres is important as the heart of the educational process at PMDG. Furthermore, Leader 5 elaborated further that the integration of three education centres includes the incorporation of PMDG's curriculum, personnel, theory and practice by combining and balancing extracurricular and intra-curricular activities (Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 2020).

According to Leader 2, in a more specific way, the concept of integration at PMDG comprises education idealism, the vision of community, and philosophy of life. All students, teachers, families, and communities around PMDG should act and practice the idea of integration systematically for the benefit of the Muslim community (*Ummah*) and other communities as well.

On the other hand, PMDG cannot be affiliated with certain political groups. As one of the prominent Islamic boarding schools, PMDG is free from any political connection that may benefit certain parties only (Abdullah Syukri Zarkasyi, 2005; 2011; 2012). As a religious educational institution, the Islamic boarding school (*Pesantren*) is considered an indigenous institution in Indonesia. It emerged with the arrival of Islam to Indonesia which was born from society with the vision of community.

The main objective of *Pesantren* is to instil the concept of oneness of God (*tauhid*), mastery of Islamic religious knowledge (*tafaqquh fî al-dîn*), human resource development that is

based on morality (Muksin, 2016). Hence, PMDG exists with the community and the vision of the community (Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor, 2017).

4.3   Integrating Theory and Practice

Religious boarding schools mostly combine the integration of theory and practice in their learning environment. The meaning of integrated school is then understood by the informants as integrating theory and practice. According to Leader 1, since the students of boarding schools live 24 hours in the school area, they have more time to practice what they have learned in the classroom under direct supervision from their respective teachers. In this sense, some informants perceived the concept of theory and practice integration as integrating the learning process and education for life itself.

More specifically, Leader 4 expressed his opinion related to theory and practice integration as follow:

> *The teachers at Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor do not focus on the learning process by teaching the subjects only. They also encourage students to practice what they have learned in the classroom in their real life. The learning process should be integrated with education for life. That way the graduates of Gontor will be individuals who are capable of implementing the knowledge for the benefit of themselves and surrounding communities.*

In this 21st century era, students need to be able to integrate and implement their knowledge as global citizens. Hence, PMDG should have specific strategies that can lead students to integrate the theory into practice effectively (Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 2020). As a modern Islamic boarding school, PMDG should be able to produce graduates who are competitive in a global world. For that reason, the school leadership of PMDG should be highly supportive to develop high-performance school management and environment.

School effectiveness is one of the major issues in the last two decades (Abidin, 2015). The roles and responsibilities of school leaders are bigger than ever (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992) due to the commodification of knowledge and its challenges of educational values (Azam et al., 2018). In responding to the 21st century challenges, the world needs strategic leaders who have appropriate visions and realistic purposes for effective school management (Bush, 2007). Hence, the role of Islamic boarding school is important as a social institution and agent of change for its surrounding communities.

4.4   Producing Open-minded Persons

This theme is in line with the vision and mission of PMDG to produce open-minded individuals who can answer the challenges of 21st century education. According to Leader 3, PMDG aims at creating mentally noble individuals, can stand on their own feet, and beneficial to society. The mentality of open-minded persons is always ready to face whatever challenges following the development and changes of the time. Specifically, Leader 3 mentioned that:

> *Gontor as an Islamic boarding school institution develops both the internal and external capacity of its graduates. Internally, students are equipped with Islamic knowledge and tradition, while externally they are prepared to be open-minded individuals who can answer the challenges of the time.*

The mentality of open-minded individuals is in line with the demand of the 21st century to adapt to rapid changes. Most people cannot accept new changes. They feel uncomfortable and it consumes a lot of their energy (Taylor & Fratto, 2012). Nonetheless, people need to adapt and accept the change to improve themselves especially with the advancement of technology. As open-minded individuals, the graduates of Islamic religious boarding schools are expected to apply the principles of tolerance (tasâmuh), balance (tawâzun), and brotherhood (ukhuwwah) (Dhofier, 1992).

According to Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi (2020), PMDG promotes the mentality of an open-minded individual by keeping and maintain the values and teaching of Islam. In the era of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, students need to open themselves to adapt to the development of technology information and communication because they are expected to socialize through technological media (Rusmini, 2014). Hence, school leaders must prepare competent individuals who can spread their Islamic knowledge by adopting the advancement of technological media.

4.5 Producing Future Education Leaders

This theme is also in line with the vision of PMDG i.e., producing quality leaders. More specifically, Leader 5 described that PMDG has the vision to produce educator leaders and leader educators who can contribute to their respective communities. Hence, preparing and producing future education leaders are considered the main agenda in the teaching and learning process at PMDG (Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, 2020).

According to Leader 6, as an Islamic education centre, PMDG should be able to produce education leaders with Islamic attributes and moral values. He pointed out that:

> Gontor has a specific mission that is implemented in the vision and mission of Pondok. The mission is to produce educators who are at the same time also leaders, and vice versa, to be able to produce leaders who are at the same time also educators. This is important to achieve because the community will be in harmony if they are led by such individuals. They can lead and at the same time also educate individuals in the communities. Or they can educate people and lead them to goodness at the same time based on Islamic teaching and moral values.

As future education leaders, graduates from PMDG are expected to have noble characters including 21st century skills such as problem-solving, communication skills, and critical thinking. Combined with what they have learned in the classroom, graduates of PMDG should have the capacity to think creatively and collaborate with other people from all over the world. They should use their knowledge wisely for the benefit of all mankind. All of these skills are important elements in determining the success and effectiveness of education outcomes (Taylor & Fratto, 2012).

5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the concept of integrated Islamic schools in the 21st century as perceived by school leaders in Pondok Modern Darussalam Gontor (PMDG), Indonesia. In general, the findings revealed four themes as the conception of integrated Islamic school. They include combining Islamic and modern education, building school and community relationship, integrating theory and practice, producing open-minded people, and producing future education leaders.

The results of this study are in line with the vision and mission of PMDG as a modern integrated Islamic school. They are also supported by previous literature and studies on the practice

of PMDG in terms of teaching methods, learning process, management, leadership, and human resource development.

On the other hand, the current study has some limitations in terms of the qualitative research approach, informants' numbers, personal interpretation of the researchers, and the scope of the study. For future studies, it is recommended to do both qualitative and quantitative approaches with all sites and branches of PMDG.

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