

The Quality Improvement Assistantship Program for Madrasa Education in Mindanao, the Philippines

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Abstract:

Madrasa education is a compelling issue in a Muslim minority country like the Philippines. Amidst the rapid pace of modernization, secular education enjoys strong government support, while Islamic teaching often remains underemphasized. However, the madrasa education system in the Philippines has begun to make positive strides through mutual learning and exchanging experiences with neighboring countries, such as Indonesia. Likewise, the present intensive and participatory assistantship program aimed to elucidate the efforts to promote religious moderation and enhance the educational quality within selected madrasas in Mindanao, the Philippines. The Participatory Action Research (PAR) method, combined with direct mentoring, was employed in this endeavor. Furthermore, the program was designed to address three key objectives: (1) strengthening religious moderation within madrasa education, (2) preparing professional teachers for madrasa education, and (3) enhancing the management of madrasa education. In summary, the outcomes of this program have the potential to contribute to the adoption of the Indonesian Islamic education model within the Muslim community in the Philippines.

Keywords: *teacher; education management; madrasa education; quality*

Introduction

Madrassa (Islamic school), or *madaris* in Arabic, is believed to have existed in the Philippines since the arrival of Islam in the country. It was initially introduced by Muslim missionaries from the Arabian and Malay Peninsula, who settled in Sulu and Western Mindanao around the thirteenth century. During its early years, Islamic education was conducted in teachers' homes, known as *pandito* or *guro*, and sometimes in mosques. The curriculum primarily focused on Arabic reading and writing, as well as the Quran (Bakar, 1983: 94). Recently, madrasa education has spread to many regions in the Philippines, primarily on Mindanao Island. It is estimated that there are approximately 600 to 1,000 madrasas in the Mindanao area, catering to 60,000 to 100,000 students (Program, n.d.). However, madrasa education in the Philippines encounters significant challenges.

The primary issue regarding madrasa education in Mindanao and the Philippines today is the absence of a precise and standardized Islamic education curriculum in the face of global challenges (Noor et al., 2007: 21). While general or secular education in the Philippines obtains substantial government support and modernization, Islamic education often takes a backseat. This disparity has led to dissatisfaction and frustration within the Muslim community, who feel compelled to accept a secular education curriculum that does not align with their Bangsamoro Muslim identity (Ali, 2012: 13). On a broader scale, the lack of understanding between the Philippines government and the Muslim community in Mindanao regarding educational curriculum regulation has also contributed to the emergence of radical movements (Cayamodin, 2019: 88-102).

The Philippines government has addressed these challenges by preparing an educational development roadmap for Muslim students (Murtadlo, 2015: 45-60). It includes offering Arabic instruction in public schools that cater to Muslim students and institutionalizing madrasa education through DepEd Order No. 51, s. 2004, which outlines the Standard Curriculum for Public Elementary Schools and Private

Madrassa (Sali, 2021: 163-185). Despite these efforts, a significant dichotomy persists between Islamic and secular courses within the Philippines education system. In this regard, religious studies are primarily pursued in madrasas, while general sciences are taught in public schools. This division in desirable learning paths has created an identity dilemma for Muslims, forcing them to choose between maintaining Islamic teachings offered in madrasas or adhering to the secular curriculum provided by the government (Kulidtod, 2017: 92-102).

Madrassa education in the Philippines has made strides through collaborative learning and exchanging experiences with neighboring countries like Indonesia (Jppn.com, 2010). Despite differing historical backgrounds, Indonesia's madrasa education system, which integrates religious studies and general sciences into a standardized curriculum, serves as a valuable reference Mindanao and the Philippines. This model has successfully enhanced the quality of the Muslim generation, enabling them to play positive roles in various aspects of national life while maintaining their devout Muslim and nationalist identities.

Method and Strategies

This community service program (*PkM*) employed Participatory Action Research (PAR), which involved the participation and leadership of individuals directly experiencing issues. In this regard, they take action to instigate emancipatory social change by conducting systematic research to generate new knowledge (Flora Cornish, 2023). Moreover, PAR represents an action grounded in scientific inquiry to effect change, guide, and improve conditions within specific groups (Nofiyanti, 2020). The method in question aims not only to contribute to the construction of knowledge but also to promote social transformation (Nelson, 2014). The program's activities included an intensive and participatory assistantship from January 23 to 26, 2023, targeting two madrasas in Davao City, specifically Wisdom Islamic School (WIS) and Eastern Mindanao Islamic Academy (EMIA).

Previously, on April 5 and 6, 2019, the team conducted a seminar on the madrasa curriculum at Mindanao State University (MSU) in General Santos City, attended by madrasa practitioners and teachers. During the assistantship program, the team prepared handouts, conducted follow-up actions, and disseminated results. The approach utilized in this program was asset-based community development, aimed at enhancing the quality of madrasa education by identifying its strengths and potential. In this agenda, educators from the assisted madrasas organized around the issue of educational quality improvement and were subsequently guided toward concrete actions to expedite positive changes.

Furthermore, the strategies employed to achieve the expected outcomes included:

- Conducting intensive communication with the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in the Philippines, liaising through the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Davao City and the Educational and Cultural Attaché regarding permits;
- Completing initial focus group discussions (FGD) by the team to formulate the design of the assistantship program;
- Holding FGDs with the team and experts from Mindanao State University (MSU) in General Santos City;
- Implementing the program with a focus on management and teachers' capacity building through FGDs and field assistantships;
- Evaluating the assistantship program;
- Facilitating dissemination and follow-up actions.

Figure 1.

A photo session with the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Davao City after the consultation



Figure 2.

A presentation session during the dissemination



Results

Condition of madrasa education in general

The condition of madrasa education in Mindanao is described as follows:

1. Curriculum

In Mindanao, the Philippines, madrasa education lacked a precise and standardized curriculum. This situation led to ineffective instructional activities as courses were often redundantly taught across various grade levels. Consequently, madrasas did not meet quality standards, primarily because the curriculum was dominated by the teaching of Arabic and the reading and writing of the Quran (Hamid, 2022: 35-47; Latif, 2014: 70-83; Sali, 2020: 201-217).

2. Teacher Quality

The quality of madrasa teachers in Mindanao, the Philippines, required significant improvement to prepare students to be competitive. Teachers, especially in weekend madrasas, were typically recruited from local communities based more on personal connections or recommendations than professional qualifications (Hamid, 2022: 35-47; Latif, 2014: 70-83; Sali, 2020: 201-217).

3. Facility and Management

The facilities and management of madrasas in Mindanao, the Philippines, were suboptimal. Learning spaces were often inadequate, and madrasas were likely managed based on ad hoc decisions rather than strategic planning, lacking clear objectives (Hamid, 2022: 35-47; Latif, 2014: 70-83; Sali, 2020: 201-217).

4. Funding

Financial challenges were acute for madrasas in Mindanao, the Philippines. In this regard, the government did not contribute financially to madrasa education, leaving them reliant on community contributions and foreign aid (Hamid, 2022: 35-47; Latif, 2014: 70-83; Sali, 2020: 201-217).

5. Self-dependence

Operating under secular governance, madrasa education in Mindanao was compelled to independently seek funding for its developmental programs, often relying on donations from Muslim-majority countries. This approach was partly due to the moderate economic standing of most Muslim communities in the Philippines (Hamid, 2022: 35-47; Latif, 2014: 70-83; Sali, 2020: 201-217).

Assistantship activities

The activities conducted during the assistantship program are described as follows:

1. FGD and field assistantship at Wisdom Islamic School (WIS)

Wisdom Islamic School adheres to the Philippines' Department of Education (DepEd) K-12 Basic Education Curriculum, augmented with integrated Islamic values. For Islamic Studies, the elementary level utilizes the DepEd's Refined Elementary Madrasa Curriculum (REMC), while the secondary level is tailored to the school's unique curriculum. Islamic subjects at the school encompass the study of the Quran, hadith, Arabic language, *aqida* (Islamic creeds), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and *Sirah* (prophetic history), each adapted to students' varying levels of knowledge and comprehension. The school diligently ensures that the content delivered is consistent with and based on the Quran and the Sunnah.

During the visit to Wisdom Islamic School (WIS), the team undertook two primary activities: a focus group discussion (FGD) and a field assistantship. WIS teachers and administrators attended the FGD in one of the school's conducive classrooms. In the process, the team expounded on religious moderation as a foundation for instructional activities in madrasa education. It showcased the curriculum used in Indonesian madrasas, the history, the distinct features differentiating *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) from *madrasa* (Islamic school), and the curriculum design for

madrassa education. The field assistantship involved observing classroom dynamics and school facilities, fostering direct interactions and dialogues with students, teachers, and school authorities.

The team elucidated that the madrasa education model in Indonesia emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was initiated by reformers in Islamic education who advocated it as a 'middle way' between the traditional *pesantren* model and the Western-influenced school model. The impetus for this reform stemmed from two key factors: *internally*, the underdevelopment and marginalization of the Indonesian Muslim community in education propelled Muslim elites to instigate educational reforms; *externally*, the influence of Indonesian students returning from studies abroad, particularly from Middle Eastern countries, sparked a movement for change. The reform led to the madrasa model of Islamic education focusing on four main objectives: (1) integrating secular subjects with religious studies; (2) adopting modern instructional methodologies; (3) implementing a structured class system rather than based solely on the complexity of religious texts; and (4) applying contemporary education management practices.

After the FGD, Dr. H. Muhlisin, M.Ag., the team leader, highlighted the parallels between Wisdom Islamic School (WIS) in Davao City and formal madrasa education in Indonesia, represented by *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI)*, *Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs)*, and *Madrasah Aliyah (MA)*. He noted that WIS in Davao City has a twelve-grade system akin to Indonesia's formal madrasa education, which integrates general and Islamic subjects. However, he pointed out that *Madrasah Aliyah* (Islamic Senior High School) in Indonesia offers various majors, including science, social studies, and languages. The team's goal in the Philippines was to introduce the structure and content of Indonesia's formal madrasa curriculum to the participants.

Figure 3.

Interaction with teachers and students at Wisdom Islamic School (WIS)



Figure 4.

A presentation to some teachers and students



2. FGD and field assistantship at Eastern Mindanao Islamic Academy
Eastern Mindanao Islamic Academy (EMIA) is a traditional madrasa that operates only during the weekends, on Saturdays and

Sundays. EMIA focuses on Islamic subjects while including certain non-Islamic subjects (mathematics and science), specifically for the lower grades. The majority of the students are day scholars. They arrive in the morning and leave in the afternoon each weekend. The graduates can only continue their higher-level studies if they attend formal education in the Philippine public schools. In this regard, EMIA serves Muslim students who expect to study Islam while continuing their education in public schools. Consequently, EMIA needs to establish a solid partnership with government schools (Deporos et al., 2021: 165-174). Additionally, EMIA provides dormitories for students who choose to reside at the school to memorize the Quran and master the Arabic language.

During the visit to EMIA in Davao City, the community service team noted that the educational system bears similarities to the *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliah (MDT)* in Indonesia. *MDT* is a non-formal educational program that offers complementary Islamic education for students enrolled in public schools. It has three levels: *awaliyah* (elementary) with a study period of six years, *mustha* (junior secondary) with a study period of three years, and *ulya* (senior secondary) also with a study period of three years. However, unlike EMIA, *MDT* is held from approximately 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. and mandates a minimum of 18 weekly lesson hours. It provides additional education to augment the Islamic studies provided by Indonesian public schools, which allocate only two hours per week.

Like the early madrasas in Mindanao, *MDT* in Indonesia has a long-standing history, emerging concurrently with the period of Islamic da'wah in the archipelago. During that era, Islamic education was integrated smoothly into the local community through an acculturation process tailored to their needs. Throughout the colonial period, almost every village with a Muslim population had some form of *madrasah diniyah (Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliah)*, known by various names such as *pengajian*, *surau*, *rangkang*, *sekolah agama*, and others. The curriculum generally included subjects like

aqidah (Islamic creeds), *ibadah* (Islamic worship), *akblaq* (Islamic ethics), Quranic reading, and the Arabic language. However, in the global era, *MDT*'s relevance has dwindled due to diminished attention from the community and the government.

In the FGD at EMIA, Dr. Muhlisin, M.Ag., emphasized that the primary consideration in any educational program should be the education of the next generation. A well-lived and well-educated life has the potential to lead a nation to greatness over the long term. However, he highlighted that the most vital form of intelligence relates to spirituality. Spiritual intelligence is a determinant in gauging the morality of a nation. Hence, it is insufficient to rely solely on formal education, such as elementary and secondary schools. In this context, both Weekend Madrasas in the Philippines and *MDT* in Indonesia provide alternative avenues to develop and strengthen religious education in formal educational institutions.

Figure 5.

A discussion session with teachers and administrators at Eastern Mindanao Islamic Academy (EMIA)



Figure 6.

A photo session with some students at Eastern Mindanao Islamic Academy (EMIA)



3. Seminar and mentoring forum at Mindanao State University in General Santos City

The seminar and mentoring forum conducted at Mindanao State University (MSU) in General Santos City provided an opportunity to exchange experiences regarding the implementation of policies for capacity building among madrasa teachers. The goal of these activities was for madrasa representatives to gain insights and motivation to develop their competencies, ultimately improving the quality of madrasa education. Approximately 20 to 25 practitioners and teachers from various madrasas in the Mindanao region, particularly from General Santos City, attended the event. The MSU forum spanned two days, comprising a seminar on the first day and a mentoring program on the second.

During the seminar, two main topics were discussed: the composition of subjects in formal madrasa education and the pedagogical strategies used in madrasas. The presenters noted that in Indonesia, the initial step toward integrating madrasa and general

education systems was the issuance of a joint decree (*SKB*) by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC), the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), and the Ministry of Home Affairs. This decree mandated that madrasas dedicate 30% of their curriculum to the MoEC's general education subjects. Furthermore, the *SKB* specified that while MoRA managed *MI*, *MTs*, and *MA*, their curriculum would be integrated with the National Education Curriculum. Additional provisions of the *SKB* included: (1) madrasa degrees were to be regarded as equivalent to general school degrees at corresponding levels; (2) madrasa graduates were eligible for further studies in general schools; and (3) madrasa students were allowed to transfer to general schools at the same educational level.

Subsequently, Law 8/1989 on Education established a formal nexus between the MoRA and MoEC, reversing the curriculum ratio to 70% in line with the general education curriculum. This ratio remained at least until 1998. The enactment of Law 25/1999 on fiscal decentralization and Law 22/1999 on regional governance transferred control and financial responsibility of schools to district governments in 1999. Afterward, in 2001, management of elementary and secondary education, inclusive of 1.6 million instructors and numerous assets, was delegated to the districts. However, the Law upheld the central government's jurisdiction over religious education, keeping madrasa education under the auspices of MoRA. In mid-2003, President Megawati authorized a new National Education System Law.

Figure 7.

Photo session with madrasa practitioners



Figure 8.

Mentoring session at Mindanao State University (MSU) in General Santos City



Discussion

Islam and madrasa education in the Philippines

According to historical records, the introduction of Islam into the Philippines via the Mindanao and Sulu routes was multifaceted. Following the death of Prophet Muhammad (*PBUH*), Islam spread to various parts of the world, including the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia, notably to the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao. The dissemination of Islam in these regions occurred through different means: *da'wah* by Muslim missionaries, conquest, or a combination of both. In Mindanao and Sulu, Islam was introduced through trade routes from Arabia to Central Asia, then to India and China, eventually reaching Southeast Asia. Muslim traders and teachers, particularly the Sufis, played a pivotal role in this process (Gamon, n.d.).

Majul posits that the advent of Islam in the Philippines resulted from the Filipino's engagement in international trade during the ninth century, notably with countries like Morocco and China. This trade witnessed participation from numerous Muslim traders from diverse nations, with Arab Muslims predominantly at the forefront. By the fourteenth century, many foreign Muslim inhabitants had made the Sulu region their home. Initially arriving for trade purposes, many married local women and chose to remain in Sulu permanently. The Islamization of the Philippines is believed to have strong links with the similar movements in Indonesia and Malaysia (Majul, 1977).

Islamic education in the Philippines, commonly referred to as madrasa education, emphasizes religious teachings and values. The inception of madrasa education can be traced back to the arrival of Islam in Sulu in the thirteenth century. Following the Islamization of Sulu, *majlis*, or special gatherings focused on the writing and reading of the Quran, started to develop. These gatherings eventually evolved into more formalized institutions known as madrasas, in which courses on religion, such as Arabic language, theology, Islamic history, and Islamic jurisprudence, were taught. As the Muslim population in the region

grew, madrasas expanded to include primary and secondary education levels.

The advent of Western colonizers and the introduction of secular education led to a marked decrease in madrasa enrolments, as these institutions struggled to compete with the secular education system, which was backed by the colonial government (Bakar, 2011: 75-89). Muslims perceived the schools established by the American colonizers as platforms promoting Christianity and as a threat to Islamic teachings (Hefner, 2009). In this context, it was reported that the American educators sent to Philippine schools were predominantly Protestant Christians (Miller, 1982: 26-27). Consequently, many Muslims in the Philippines were reluctant to send their children to public schools, steadfast in their belief that madrasa education was the appropriate educational pathway for Muslim children (Isidro, 1980: 54).

Characteristics and challenges of madrasa education

Lingga (2004) explains that after the Philippines' independence from America in 1946, Sulu and Mindanao gradually strengthened their relationship with some Arab countries. This notion began when Muslim students from Mindanao were accepted to study at Al-Azhar University in Egypt. Many of them also received scholarships to pursue academic degrees in the Middle East focused on Islamic studies. After completing their education and returning home, these students served as Muslim missionaries and established madrasa education and Quran schools, contributing to the growth of the propagation of Islam in the Philippines (Lingga, 2004: 1-14).

In general, there are three types of madrasas in the Philippines. The first is the traditional or the weekend madrasa. It offers non-formal education with the following characteristics: (a) classes are held on Saturdays and Sundays or other days according to the agreement between teachers and students; (b) they do not follow a formal curriculum; (c) they do not employ a class system, so one learning group may consist of students from different age groups; and (d) the teachers

are typically madrasa graduates or imams. The government does not recognize this type of madrasa because it does not adhere to the Philippines' national education curriculum (DepEd ALIVE, n.d.-b).

The second type is the formal or developmental madrasa. It employs a class system similar to traditional public schools in the Philippines, ranging from elementary to secondary levels. This type of madrasa primarily focuses on religious studies and includes a few general courses, such as mathematics and science, with Arabic language as the medium of instruction. However, the formal madrasa does not follow the curriculum set by the Department of Education of the Philippines. Consequently, graduates cannot continue their studies to higher levels in formal schools. Moreover, this madrasa is neither accredited nor recognized by the Department of Education of the Philippines (DepEd ALIVE, n.d.-b).

The third type is the standard or private madrasa. The private madrasa has been recognized as a part of the Philippines' national education system through DepEd Order No. 51, s. 2004, which outlines the Standard Curriculum for Elementary Public Schools and Private Madrasa. This type of madrasa follows the standard curriculum set by the Department of Education and is accredited and acknowledged by the government. Nevertheless, it still includes Islamic studies and Arabic language in its curriculum (DepEd ALIVE, n.d.-b).

Improving the quality of madrasa education

The improvement of madrasa education quality typically aims to achieve two primary objectives: improving student achievement and elevating the accreditation status of madrasas. This endeavor involves at least three key aspects: 1) teacher professionalism, 2) madrasa education management, and 3) learning facilities and media.

1. Improving teacher professionalism

The improvement in teacher professionalism has a profound impact on the quality of madrasa education. Professional teachers are known to create an engaging and enjoyable learning

environment, facilitating the optimal execution of learning activities. Furthermore, they significantly influence the development of students' character values. Hence, madrasa education requires professional educators who are qualified, trained, motivated, and responsible. Effective learning can only transpire when teachers fulfill their professional roles, impacting students' performance and achievements.

2. Implementing effective management

Madrasa education management is another pivotal aspect contributing to quality improvement. In this regard, management encompasses everything related to the control and organization of the educational process to accomplish short-term, intermediate, or long-term goals. It includes planning, implementation, and problem analysis. *Firstly*, in the planning phase, the focus is on determining how teaching programs should be conducted, including the distribution of teachers and courses, provision of textbooks and learning resources, development of laboratories and libraries, and organization of curricular activities (Warsiyah et al., 2022: 115-132). *Secondly*, the implementation phase incorporates strategies for fostering quality madrasa education, such as program socialization, SWOT analysis, problem-solving, quality enhancement, and evaluation. *Thirdly*, problem analysis considers community participation and economic conditions, as it can impact the quality of madrasas. In essence, madrasa education management should receive solid support from supervisors and principals to actualize the anticipated improvement in education quality.

3. Enhancing learning facilities and media

Learning facilities and media are vital elements that warrant substantial attention to elevate the quality of madrasa education. They include all the facilities directly utilized in the educational process. In this regard, madrasa education should offer learning facilities and media that enable students to develop their talents and abilities as exemplary human beings. To maximize the effectiveness,

proper management is essential. Hence, it should be meticulously planned, provided, cataloged, stored, organized, utilized, maintained, and, when necessary, upgraded.

The quality improvement program for madrasa education in Mindanao, the Philippines, typically comprises several components. *First and foremost*, standardization of teaching materials and curricula is crucial, especially in Islamic studies and the Arabic language. *Second*, madrasa teachers and administrators should actively engage in academic activities such as short courses and workshops in educational management and administration. *Third*, the Muslim community in Mindanao should establish a private foundation to raise funds to sustain madrasa education. *Fourth*, it is imperative to encourage intelligent Muslim students from Mindanao to pursue educational scholarships in various fields of study (Madale, 1988: 359-377). As this quality improvement program is a long-term endeavor, consistent, staged actions are necessary.

Conclusion

The present intensive and participatory assistantship program highlighted two main issues: promoting religious moderation in madrasa education and improving educational quality. Activities undertaken to address these issues included focus group discussions (FGD), field assistantships, seminars, and mentoring forums. These activities were conducted at three sites: Wisdom Islamic School (WIS) in Davao City, Eastern Mindanao Islamic Academy (EMIA) in Davao City, and Mindanao State University (MSU) in General Santos City. The approach employed in this program was asset-based community development. The results of this program indicate that (1) Religious moderation in madrasa education can be strengthened, (2) Professional teachers in madrasa education can be prepared, and (3) The management of madrasa education can be enhanced. In general, the outcomes of this program could contribute to promoting the Indonesian Islamic education model within the Muslim community in the Philippines.

However, given that this program was limited to particular madrasas, it was evident that there was still significant work to be done by the Muslim community in Mindanao concerning the quality of madrasa education, especially in curriculum design and inclusive learning. Hence, the road to improving madrasa quality in Mindanao is long, and concrete steps must be taken in stages and consistently.

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