



Challenges and Strategies for Increasing the Popularity of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools in Jambi Province

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Abstract: The emergence of Integrated Islamic Primary Schools (SDIT) in Indonesia has raised concerns regarding the orientation of Islamic education that is trapped between ideological idealism and market pragmatism. This study aims to describe the challenges and strategies faced by market-oriented SDITs in increasing their popularity. Using a qualitative approach with observation, interview and documentation techniques, this research involved principals, teachers, students and parents. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, which included collection, presentation, reduction and conclusion drawing. The findings show the main challenges include competition with public schools, curriculum balance, education costs and parents' expectations. Strategies implemented include developing an integrated curriculum, improving the quality of teachers, developing facilities and actively involving parents. This research provides insights into the dynamics of SDIT and offers strategies to overcome challenges in a competitive education market.

Abstrak: Kemunculan Sekolah Dasar Islam Terpadu (SDIT) di Indonesia menimbulkan kegelisahan terkait orientasi pendidikan Islam yang terjebak antara idealisme ideologis dan pragmatisme pasar. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan tantangan dan strategi yang dihadapi oleh SDIT berorientasi pasar dalam meningkatkan popularitasnya. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan teknik observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi, penelitian ini melibatkan kepala sekolah, guru, siswa, dan orang tua siswa. Analisis data mengikuti model Miles dan Huberman, yang mencakup pengumpulan, penyajian, reduksi, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Temuan menunjukkan tantangan utama meliputi persaingan dengan sekolah umum, keseimbangan kurikulum, biaya pendidikan, dan ekspektasi orang tua. Strategi yang diterapkan mencakup pengembangan kurikulum terpadu, peningkatan kualitas guru, pengembangan fasilitas, dan keterlibatan aktif orang tua. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan tentang dinamika SDIT dan menawarkan strategi untuk mengatasi tantangan dalam pasar pendidikan yang kompetitif.

Keywords: SDIT, Education Challenges, School Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Islamic education in Indonesia has undergone dynamic development as part of the national education subsystem (Baba, 2018). One interesting phenomenon is the emergence of Integrated Islamic Schools (SIT), particularly at the elementary school level. In this context, the phenomenon of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools (SDIT) has raised academic concerns regarding the orientation of Islamic education in Indonesia, which is caught between ideological idealism and the pragmatism of the education market.

Some Muslim parents desire educational institutions that are not only academically excellent but also safe, comfortable, conducive, and Islamic, making SDIT an increasingly popular educational alternative (Faridahanum, 2013). Despite being relatively new, SDITs have demonstrated a strong presence and become the primary choice among Muslim communities (A. Lubis, 2018). This phenomenon is also evident in Jambi Province, where various SDITs have emerged in recent years. Data from the Jambi Province Central Statistics Agency (2022/2023) shows that out of 2,463 elementary schools, 155 are private schools, with approximately 94 being Islamic-based private schools and 61 being general private schools. The dominance of SDIT in Jambi Province indicates significant quantitative growth, although there are concerns regarding the quality and ideological orientation of these schools.

These concerns arise due to differences in characteristics between SDITs affiliated with the Integrated Islamic School Network (JSIT) and those that are not. SDITs affiliated with JSIT generally have a clear ideology, standardized curriculum, and a strong orientation toward Islamic values. JSIT plays a role in determining curriculum standards, teacher training, and the implementation of Islamic values in its member schools. In contrast, some SDITs not affiliated with JSIT tend to be more market-oriented, using the “Islamic Integrated” label

to attract parents without strictly adhering to JSIT's curriculum and standards.

These differing orientations raise questions about the quality and consistency of education offered by SDITs in Jambi Province. Do all SDITs provide substantive Islamic education, or do some merely use the Islamic label for marketing purposes? How do SDITs with ideological orientations and those with market-oriented orientations differ in their educational practices? These questions require further research to address the growing academic concerns.

The emergence of SDITs is also influenced by various factors, including Islamic organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which emphasizes Islamic thinking among students, and the influence of Islamism, which reinforces the characteristics of SDITs affiliated with JSIT (Kurnaengsih, 2015). On the other hand, Marwazi and Abid M.H. (2021) explain that the decline of traditional madrasahs following the 2008 education standardization policy also contributed to the development of SIT as a response to market opportunities, not merely due to ideological motivations. Additionally, Fauzan Ismael & Iswantir (2022) note that society desires Islamic educational institutions that integrate religious values with modern education, particularly among urban middle-class Muslim parents.

Previous studies have revealed the influence of social movements on SDIT (Marwazi and Abid, 2021) and the role of Islamic identity politics in the involvement of conservative Muslims in Islamic schools (Pribadi, 2021). However, no study has specifically examined market-oriented SDIT in Jambi Province, as well as the challenges and strategies they implement to increase their popularity. Therefore, it is important to conduct this study to understand the challenges and strategies of SDIT in Jambi Province, particularly those with a market-oriented approach. This study is expected to provide significant contributions to the development of Islamic education policies in Indonesia that are more adaptive to societal

needs without compromising the fundamental values of Islamic education.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with the aim of exploring in depth the challenges and strategies implemented by market-oriented Integrated Islamic Schools (SDIT) in Jambi Province. This study will be conducted in several SDITs in Jambi Province, specifically at SDIT Al Muthmainnah in Jambi City, SDIT Nurul Hikmah in Tanjung Jabung Timur, SDIT Diniyah Al Azhar in Tebo, and SDIT Al Azhar 57. The selection of research locations is based on the characteristics of these schools, which are market-oriented SDITs not affiliated with the Integrated Islamic School Network (JSIT), and have a large number of students and various achievements at the provincial level in Jambi.

The research subjects include school principals, teachers, parents, and students. The data collection techniques used consist of observation, interviews, and documentation (Arif & Sulistianah, 2019). Participant observation was conducted by observing and recording the activities carried out by school principals, teachers, parents, and students in the context of educational activities and social interactions at SDIT. Structured interviews will be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies faced by integrated Islamic schools in increasing their popularity. Documentation will include the collection and analysis of documents relevant to this study, such as annual reports, curricula, and school policies.

In an effort to increase data validity and reduce subjectivity, this study uses data triangulation. Data triangulation will be conducted by collecting data from various sources, including interviews with the principal, teachers, parents, and students, as well as direct observation in the field and relevant documentation. By using multiple data sources, it is hoped that a more comprehensive and objective understanding of the phenomenon under study can be obtained.

Data analysis will be conducted using a descriptive qualitative analysis approach based on the model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which includes four main stages: data collection, data presentation, data reduction, and conclusion drawing. Data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation will be presented in the form of structured narratives. Next, the data will be reduced by selecting and summarizing information relevant to the research objectives. After the reduction process, conclusions will be drawn based on the data analysis that has been conducted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Main challenges faced by SDITs in Jambi Province in an effort to increase their popularity

Competition with public schools

The presence of SDITs oriented to the education market in Jambi province faces challenges with the general education system. Extra effort is needed to demonstrate the advantages of an integrated curriculum that combines general education and Islamic values. Tight competition with public schools that have a good reputation and more affordable costs. Even competition with JSIT-affiliated SDITs with a standardized curriculum, and a strong Islamic values orientation. Competition from private schools, both madrasah ibtidiyah and private and public elementary schools, encourages integrated Islamic schools to continue to innovate in academic programs, extracurricular activities, modern facilities such as laboratories, libraries and sports facilities as well as Islamic manners habituation services. As explained by the Head of SDIT Nurul Hikmah Tanjung Jabung Timur:

“Our school also provides Islamic manners habituation services in addition to superior programs that emphasize general and religious education, becoming the selling point of our school”.

Furthermore, to face the competition of SDIT with other public schools, a more aggressive marketing strategy is carried out, including the use of social media and digital marketing and conducting events. Qualitative research related to integrated Islamic schools on public relations strategies to create school branding revealed that strategies are designed and developed with schools and implemented according to schedule (Sholihah, 2018). From a marketing perspective, SIT is not a competitor to madrasah and pesantren, as they have different market shares. SIT has comprehensively mastered almost all aspects of education marketing. For example, most locations are in urban centers, offer integrative concepts, promise professionalism, quality assurance, and SIT wins the image as a socially prestigious choice (Yusuf Prasetiawan & Ma`rifataini, 2021).

Curriculum Balance

SDIT's journey in developing education that integrates general knowledge with Islamic perspectives finds challenges in balancing the national curriculum with Islamic content in a limited time allocation in accordance with parents' expectations both in terms of academics and Islamic values. Another challenge related to the curriculum found at SDIT Al Muthmainnah Jambi City is learning, given the current curriculum that changes, therefore teachers must diligently understand the curriculum that changes every time. As a teacher, you must continue to update information about the latest curriculum used. As is the case now that there is an independent curriculum, SDIT Al Muthmainnah Jambi City teachers also receive training and implement the independent curriculum. Based on research by Yuli Marlina (2023), it is stated that the independent curriculum provides new experiences for teachers in Indonesia, especially in Integrated Islamic Schools and socialization is still needed for all school policy stakeholders (Marlina et al., 2023). Furthermore, related to time

distribution, SDIT has difficulty in dividing time between general subjects, religious subjects and special programs such as tahfidz Qur'an without reducing the quality of one aspect. The head of curriculum at SDIT Diniyah Al Azhar Tebo said:

“when compiling the curriculum, we found it difficult to allocate enough time for the tahfidz program without sacrificing general subjects. Finally, we decided that the tahfiz program would be conducted in the morning before the learning begins.”

SIT combines aqliyah, ruhiyah and jasadiyah education. Which means SIT strives to educate students to become people who develop their minds and intelligence, increase faith and the quality of faith and obedience to Allah SWT, build noble morals, and are healthy, fit, and skilled in daily life (Sofanudin, 2019). Furthermore, Purwanto Anim, the results of his research reveal that curriculum development planning is guided by a typical book with an integrated Islamic school curriculum (Purwanto, 2021). In line with Abdullah (2017) explains that Islamic education is developing positively, where Islamic education has now been integrated into national education, which indicates that there is an intensive relationship between the two (M. Fazlurrahman, 2017).

Education Costs

SDIT may have higher operational costs due to the integrated curriculum, which could be a barrier for some families. Because the SDITs in this study are self-funded by parents and some are self-funded by the government through BOS funds, in contrast to JSIT-affiliated SDITs, which have funding streams other than parents and the government. Challenges in balancing the quality of education with affordability. SDIT was able to explain the added value of SDIT which has higher costs compared to other public and private schools. This high cost is in accordance with the needs of developing modern

facilities and learning technology as well as financing superior programs such as tahfidz Qur'an, English and Arabic language or extracurricular activities. SDIT also provides attractive competitive salaries to retain quality teachers without overburdening parents. (Firdausi, 2020) mentioned that to be able to take part in learning at an Integrated Islamic School, you must provide funds that are not cheap with offers of learning systems, luxurious buildings and adequate facilities as if explaining that quality education must be expensive (Kurniawan, 2020). The high enthusiasm of the Indonesian Muslim community for integrated Islamic schools must be maintained so as not to be trapped in a circle of commercialization of education that only focuses on financial gain, but lacks scientific capacity and depth. It is important to avoid the meaning of integrated Islamic schools from being distorted and only related to financial aspects (Irwan et al., 2024).

Quality Consistency

Consistent quality is a significant challenge for SDIT. The challenge of maintaining consistent graduate quality in academic quality and Islamic character from year to year. The difficulty of maintaining consistent academic quality standards in all aspects of accreditation, quality of teaching staff, learning and facilities, updating the curriculum in accordance with the national curriculum without losing the essence of integrated Islamic education, and ensuring the formation of consistent Islamic character or morals in all students as the number of students increases. Furthermore, challenges in maintaining excellent programs and developing new programs. The homeroom teacher at SDIT Al Azhar 57 Jambi said:

“Our school is always consistent in supporting the superior tahfiz program, our children every morning have a routine of memorizing short letters, the results of which will be written in the memorization rubric.”

Parental Expectations

The existence of SDIT is very well received by parents who have school-age children in Jambi Province. Parents expect that SDIT can provide good academic services between general knowledge and religious knowledge to their children. Parents' expectations of SDIT for high academic results, balanced between general and religious subjects as well as Islamic character building and good preparation for their children to continue to a higher level of education are strong. Parents expect the inculcation of Islamic values in their children's daily lives, the formation of noble character and personality in accordance with Islamic teachings with the superior programs of worship habituation that are always carried out at SDIT, the Quran Tahfidz Program with clear targets using tahfidz methods that are effective and fun for children. In accordance with the statement of the guardian of SDIT Nurul Hikmah Tanjung Jabung Timur students:

“We see the habituation program of worship in this school so we entrust our children to this school expecting the embedding of Islamic values and morals and behavior in accordance with Islamic teachings”.

In the general field, parents also expect their children who attend SDIT to have foreign language skills, both English and Arabic. SDIT Al Azhar 57 Jambi has a mandatory English or Arabic language program in the daily lives of students in the school environment. Furthermore, parents who send their children to SDIT also expect good educational facilities and services. Comfortable classrooms equipped with learning technology, good libraries, laboratories and sports facilities as well as competent educators in the academic and religious fields by applying creative and effective learning methods so as to prepare children who are able to face the digital era. These expectations reflect parents' desire to provide a complete education that prepares their children not

only academically, but also spiritually and morally. Parents expect SDIT to be a partner in shaping a generation that is smart, faithful, and ready to face future challenges.

2. SDIT's strategy in increasing popularity in Jambi Province

Integrated Curriculum Development

The head of SDIT Nurul Hikmah Tanjung Jabung Timur mentioned that in developing the school, SDIT has an integrated signature curriculum that distinguishes it from public schools. SDIT integrates the national curriculum with Islamic values, integrating Islamic teachings and values into all subjects and harmonizing general science with an Islamic perspective. In addition, it integrates character building in every learning activity. In line with the explanation of Muhammad Roji (2019), SIT is an educational institution that integrates two forms of education, namely Islamic education and general education, aiming to foster students' character or *akhlakul karimah* and students' competencies and skills (Rojii et al., 2019). An integrated Islamic school is a form of education that provides a good combination of modern academic curriculum with Islamic values that are so perfect (Rustandi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the integrated concept shows that there is integration of parents and teachers, integration in the curriculum and integration in the concept of education (Amrullah, 2015). To support this integration, SDIT conducts training to improve the ability of teachers to integrate the curriculum and periodically evaluate and revise the curriculum for continuous improvement. This fact proves the trust of the Indonesian Muslim community in Islamic schools with integrated labels, which certainly helps the government realize a smart and illiterate-free Indonesia (A. Lubis, 2018).

Teacher Quality Improvement

The first strategy to improve the quality of teachers is a selective recruitment system by recruiting highly qualified teachers and having a good understanding of Islam with a gradual selection process including written tests, interviews and micro teaching. In accordance with what SDIT Al Azhar 57 does, recruiting teachers is very selective, proficient in English and Arabic, an added value in recruitment is good behavior in accordance with Islamic values. These criteria imply that the selection of prospective teachers does not only rely on academic achievement, but also on academic achievement, but also on independence and good personality (M. A. Lubis, 2015). Among the basic principles of integrated Islamic education is the role of the teacher. The role of teachers in translating the vision developed by integrated Islamic schools is very important. Most responsible for instilling secular and religious knowledge, teachers are considered the key to the success of the teaching and learning process in integrated Islamic schools. To carry out this task, teachers are required to have teaching competence and professionalism. An indication of a teacher's competence is his or her ability to transfer knowledge to students and guide them to achieve a level of moral integrity (Bahroni, 2016).

Furthermore, the continuous professional development program for teachers by conducting workshops and seminars on the latest teaching methods, training on the integration of Islamic values in learning and competency improvement programs in the field of study as well as strengthening the implementation of an independent curriculum and even training in the use of digital media and teaching aids and the development of online learning content. Periodic performance evaluations for both teaching and education personnel are also carried out at SD IT. Competency-based assessment and student achievement as

well as classroom supervision by the principal or supervisor.

Development of Modern Facilities

SDIT Al Azhar 57 Classrooms with the latest learning technology by installing interactive projectors or smart TVs. In addition, SDIT also provides sports facilities and a complete laboratory. The laboratory is equipped with KIT Science experiments that are safe for elementary school children. Multifunctional sports facilities by designing a field that can be used for various types of sports, providing sports equipment that is suitable for the age of elementary school children and creating a safe and educational outdoor play area and having health facilities by providing a UKS room with adequate basic equipment and a modern security system by installing CCTV at strategic points and some installing security alarms.

Featured Program

Developing unique flagship programs is one of the main ways to improve the attractiveness and quality of SDIT education. Development of special programs such as tahfidz Quran by providing highly qualified tahfidz teachers and native Arabic speakers. Implementation of bilingual education program (Arabic-English) since the early grades by holding English day and Arabic day alternately every week and specifically SDIT Al Azhar 57 requires foreign languages during the learning process. SDIT Nurul Hikmah Tanjung Jabung Timur also has a superior program of tahsin, tahfiz, skilled in English and Arabic, habituation of Islamic manners.

Organizing extracurricular activities that are diverse and interesting. The development of extracurricular activities that combine modern skills and Islamic values such as calligraphy, nasyid and tausiah. The results showed that each SDIT has at least more than one excellent program that distinguishes it from other schools. In line with Sofanudin Aji's research (2019) also found that integrated Islamic schools have advantages over

public schools, especially related to the religious curriculum in Integrated Islamic Schools which is much more than public schools. In addition, there are also religious practices such as dhuhur and duha prayers, fasting and reciting the Koran (Sofanudin, 2019).

Active Engagement with Parents

SDIT's strategy in the active involvement of parents and the community is an important aspect in improving the quality of education and school popularity. The strategies are periodic parenting programs, active school committees and community empowerment programs. The periodic parenting program is carried out by organizing Islamic parenting seminars and workshops by regularly inviting experts in education and child psychology as well as utilizing the expertise of parents as guest speakers to share knowledge with parents on the topic of Islamic parenting, character education and child development. Parenting seminars aim to share knowledge with parents about the importance of the role of parents and education, especially in relation to child development and how to educate children by not forgetting to foster character values (Ningrum, 2022). In addition, it also provides a family mentoring program by teachers or school counselors to assist parents in overcoming the challenges of children's education at home by providing family spirituality guidance according to Islamic teachings. This parenting program is conducted at SDIT Diniyah Al Azhar Tebo:

“Yes, our school has a parenting program 1-2 times per year in the form of parenting seminars, sometimes we invite experts sometimes we ask for help from student guardians who are experts in parenting.”

Furthermore, parenting activities are also filled with communicating child development reports covering academic, character and spiritual aspects. Providing regular updates on the child's activities at

school and academic progress. The results of these activities provide specific recommendations for the child's development at home. The parenting program aims to ensure that guardians participate in their children's educational process (Sidoarjo, 2021).

Character Building Focus

SDIT's strategy in focusing on character building is a key aspect that distinguishes it from other public schools. In the learning process, SDIT integrates Islamic teachings and moral values in every subject, for example by linking the subject matter with examples of exemplary behavior from Islamic history. The second strategy carried out in character building is the worship habituation program by implementing mandatory congregational prayers at school both compulsory prayers and prayers, namely duha prayers and even holding sunnah fasting programs and routine alms. Furthermore, the strategy is the role model program that emphasizes the importance of role models from teachers and school staff, holding special training for teachers about being an example of Islamic character and introducing inspirational stories of Muslim figures as role models. SDIT also focuses on Character Building Activities that organize scouting activities and outbound and camp activities that focus on character building. Educational institutions must innovate, collaborate and improvise in integrating character values into students. It is not enough for students to only get knowledge, but character must be instilled in learning at school so that they have good character (Fakhrurrozi et al., 2023). In line with Lely Nur (2022), it is suggested that there is optimal and cooperative involvement between teachers and parents and the community to foster the character and competence of students in SIT (Nur & Syafitri, 2022). Parents do not hesitate to entrust their children to be educated at SDIT with the hope that their children will become a generation that excels in intelligence and morals (Neliwati et al.,

2022). SIT is orientated towards faith and the formation of students' personalities in accordance with Islamic values (Ginting, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study examines the challenges and strategies faced by market-oriented SDITs in an effort to increase their popularity. The main challenges faced by SDITs in Jambi Province include: a. Competition with public schools, which encourages SDITs to continue to innovate in academic programs, extracurricular activities, and facilities. b. Curriculum balance, namely balancing the national curriculum with Islamic content in a limited time allocation. c. Relatively higher tuition fees, but the added value needs to be explained to parents. d. Quality consistency in various aspects, including academics, Islamic character, and excellent programs. e. Meeting parents' expectations in various aspects, including academics, Islamic character, and excellent programs. Consistency of quality in various aspects, including academics, Islamic character, and excellent programs. e. Meeting the high expectations of parents regarding the balance of general and religious education, as well as the formation of Islamic character.

Strategies applied by SDIT to increase popularity include: a. Development of an integrated curriculum that integrates Islamic values into all subjects. b. Improving the quality of teachers through selective recruitment and continuous professional development. c. Development of modern facilities, including the latest learning technology and well-equipped laboratories. d. Implementation of unique flagship programmes, such as tahtir (Islamic schooling). Implementation of unique flagship programmes, such as tahfidz Quran, bilingual programmes, and diverse extracurricular activities. e. Active engagement with parents through regular parenting programmes and intensive communication. f. Focus on character building through the integration of Islamic values in learning and worship habituation programmes (Nur & Syafitri, 2022).

This research shows that SDITs in Jambi Province have succeeded in attracting public interest by offering education that integrates general knowledge with Islamic values, as well as focusing on character building. The success of SDITs in facing challenges and implementing effective strategies has contributed to the increasing popularity and quality of integrated Islamic education in Jambi Province. The results of this study can serve as a reference for the development of educational policies and improving the quality of integrated Islamic schools in the future, as well as providing insights for other educational institutions in integrating religious values with modern education.

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