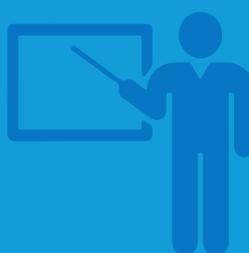


June 2016

The Potential of Independent Religious Schools: A Case Study of Al-Amin

By Altaf Deviyati



Abstract

Religious private schools have gained popularity in Malaysia but are they a viable alternative to the mainstream school system? This paper presents a case study of Sekolah Rendah and Sekolah Menengah Islam (SRI and SMI) Al-Amin, a private Islamic school that is a member of the MUSLEH schools run by Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (IKRAM). It provides a brief overview of the different types of private schools including private Islamic schools in Malaysia.

This is followed by a qualitative analysis of Al-Amin in terms of the school's profile, management as well as the parent's motivations in sending their children to a private religious school. The key finding of this study is that Islamic private schools have the potentials to offer quality education. This ability is partly due to the school's ability to independently manage its own affairs; nurture collaborative relationships between parents and teachers as well as host value-added extra-curricular activities.

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I An Overview of Private Schools in Malaysia

Private schools in Malaysia are fee-paying schools in which the school's management and governance is independent of the Ministry of Education. This means that they are not bound by many of the rules, regulations, and policies that government schools have to adhere to. An example would be on the usage of the national curriculum - private schools are allowed to use the national curriculum if they wish to do so, but can supplement this with additional subjects or even use a completely different curriculum.

I.1 Private Schools in Malaysia

There are at least five types of private schools in Malaysia, they are: international schools, private schools (that use the national curriculum), expatriate schools, Chinese independent schools as well as private religious schools.

International schools generally offer either British, American, Australian or the Inter-

national Baccalaureate curriculum. Expatriate schools cater to expatriate communities such as the French and Japanese schools in Malaysia and use the national curriculum of a specific country. Chinese Independent schools on the other hand use the Chinese language as its medium of teaching¹. There are also Malaysian private schools which use the national curriculum - this the most

popular type of private school² as these schools offer additional subjects, low teacher to student ratios and are relatively affordable as compared to other international schools. Finally, there are also private religious schools which use the national curriculum but with a specific focus on religious studies.

Table I: Types of Private Schools

Type of private schools	International schools	Private schools	Expatriate schools	Chinese Independent schools	Private Religious schools
Curriculum	Various - including International Baccalaureate, IGCSE and other British, American and Australian curriculums	Uses the national curriculum and may have other curriculums running in parallel or extra subject offerings	Serves the expatriate community (usually caters to the children of diplomats) and the school uses the respective country's curriculum	Uses the United Examination Certificate (UEC) which is not recognised by local Malaysian universities however is accepted in universities worldwide	Various – including International Baccalaureate, IGCSE and other British, American and Australian curriculums
Affordability	The most expensive private school option in Malaysia. Fees vary but can go up to RM5,000 per month ³	More affordable than international schools RM750 to RM920 per month ³	Fees range between RM1,170 to RM2,750 per month ³	The fees vary depending on the school and the location. Generally, fees are around RM 1,000 per month	The most affordable school with fees as low as RM 350 - 400 per month
Example	International School of Kuala Lumpur; Mont Kiara International School, Sri KDU International School	Sekolah Sri Cempaka, Kolej Yayasan Saad Melaka, Kolej Tuanku Jaafar	British International School of Kuala Lumpur; Australian International School Malaysia	Chung Hwa Independent High School, Jit Sin High School, Kuen Cheng High School	Sekolah Menengah Islam Adni, Sekolah Menengah Islam Al-Amin

¹ See Policy IDEAS No 23: A Case Study of a Chinese Independent School by Associate Professor Grace Lee Hooi Yean and Associate Professor Gareth Leeves for further reading.

² See Policy IDEAS No 24: School Autonomy : Case Study of Private School Chains in Malaysia by Nina Adlan Disney for further reading

³ This amount was divided by 12 months to get a comparable rate with the other school options.

1.2 Islamic Private Schools

Over the past two decades in Malaysia, there has also been a rise in the popularity of private schools that offer Islamic subjects such as Qur'anic studies and Islamic theology in addition to teaching the national curriculum.

In the past, Islamic education was only available through the Sekolah Pondok. The Sekolah Pondok teaches Islamic subjects and have been around long before the arrival of British colonial powers. They still exist today, the primary objective of the Sekolah Pondok is to equip students with the values needed to become a good Muslim.

Islamic private schools are one of four types of Islamic schools in Malaysia. The other three are National Religious Schools which are mostly Secondary schools; State Religious schools that can be divided into both primary and secondary; and Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) also known as Sekolah Pondok. These schools differ in terms of management, sources of funding and, to a certain extent, curriculum.

National religious schools fall directly under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (MOE) while State religious schools fall under the purview of State agencies. SAR and private Islamic schools are independent, the former receives partial funding from the Government along with private donations while the latter is predominantly funded through student fees.

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Table 2: Types of Islamic Schools

Type of Islamic schools	Islamic Private Schools	National Religious Schools	State Religious Schools	Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR)/Sekolah Pondok
Management	Independent	Under Ministry of Education	Under state religious departments	Independent
Curriculum	National Curriculum with additional subjects	National Curriculum	National Curriculum, Al-Azhar University Curriculum	National curriculum with additional subjects from State Religious Departments (this only applies to those that are partially funded by the Government).
Sources of Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student fees • Donations 	Government	Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partial government funding • Donations • Student fees

2 Methodology

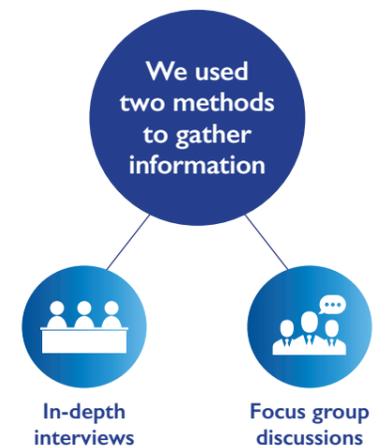
This paper is part of a wider study to understand how non-international private schools in Malaysia operate and the choices they represent to parents.

The paper attempts to provide an overview of how one private Islamic school in Malaysia is managed and what attracts parents to enrol their children into this school. The main research question we asked is “how does this particular Islamic private school exercise its autonomy and how does it benefit from it?”

Using a qualitative case study we looked into the school's management, sources of funding, regulations that the school has to follow, as well as the reasons why parent's decided to enrol their children into this school.

We used two methods to gather information: in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. We conducted in-depth interviews with the principal and vice-principal of Sekolah Rendah Islamic Al-Amin, Gombak as well as focus group discussions with four parents whose children attended the school. Interviews were conducted in an open-ended manner and the responses were recorded in audiotapes and interview notes.

It is to be noted here that although cases studies can provide invaluable insights, readers should exercise caution in generalising the findings of this study.



3 Case Study: SRI/SMI Al Amin Gombak, Selangor.

3.1 Background of IKRAM-MUSLEH Schools

To better understand this school and the needs it fulfils, it is important to understand how it came about and the background of IKRAM, the organisation that spearheaded these cluster of Islamic religious schools.

In the early 1970s, Islam was a leading force of social change in Malaysia. During this time new religious discourse on Islam appeared which appealed to the Muslim community, particularly amongst university students. The era saw to the rise of da'wah (proselytisation) movements that were part of the emerging discourse on Islam. Da'wah movements were usually lead, if not always, by student organisations or movements at

both local and international levels. These student movements played a pivotal role in mainstreaming Islamic values and discourse.

Many of these students wanted to incorporate Islamic values into their daily life and the lives of their communities, which lead to some of them establishing non-profit organisations to continue da'wah efforts.

There were two prominent da'wah organisations that exist till this day. One is the Jemaah Islah Malaysia (JIM) which would become known as Pertubuhan Ikram Malaysia (IKRAM) and the other is Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM).

JIM was officially established in 1990 and had a branch in nearly every State in the country. The initial tenets of JIM was to reform (Islah) society through da'wah (call to God's path) and tarbiyah (education). The organisation proactively utilised education as a means for creating an Islamic and just society, which eventually led them to establish their first school in Gombak, Selangor. In 2009, JIM reorganised and changed its name to Pertubuhan IKRAM Malaysia (IKRAM). By 2012, IKRAM had established 39 primary and secondary schools known as the IKRAM-MUSLEH³ schools.

³ MUSLEH is an entity created by IKRAM for its education related work in 2000. MUSLEH, an Arabic word meaning reformer: MUSLEH empowers, cooperates with, monitors and shares resources besides a mutual vision with IKRAM-MUSLEH primary schools, known as Sekolah Rendah Islam (SRI) and IKRAM-MUSLEH secondary schools or Sekolah Menengah Islam (SMI).

Today, under the banner of MUSLEH, IKRAM's education arm, there are 26 primary schools (Sekolah Rendah Islam, SRI) and 13 secondary schools (Sekolah Menengah Islam, SMI) all over the country. MUSLEH is governed by a board of directors who are in charge of policy making and the strategic direction of MUSLEH as a whole. On top of that, the board is responsible for fundraising.

In addition to the board, there is also the Majlis Guru Besar Sekolah-sekolah Islam Malaysia (MGB SIM) which was formed in 1996. The MGB SIM acts as a supporting body to MUSLEH schools by formulating and implementing policies or through setting up programmes relevant to MUSLEH's educational aspirations. Other functions include overseeing the welfare of MUSLEH'S SRI/SMI staff and monitoring the progress of SRI/SMI schools.

Each MUSLEH school is independently managed. They have their own board of directors and a registry number although they fall under the umbrella of MUSLEH schools.

3.2 Al-Amin School, Gombak

The main focus of this paper is the Al-Amin school in Gombak, which runs a primary and secondary school in its campus. Established in 1986, Sekolah Rendah Islam Al-Amin Kuala Lumpur (SRIAACL) taught a combination of the national curriculum with its own Islamic curriculum.

Given the encouraging initial response, the Al-Amin school then opened the Sekolah Rendah Islam Al-Amin Gombak in Gombak, Selangor in 1988 and then their first private Islamic secondary school (Sekolah Menengah Islam Al-Amin Gombak) in 1990 which also used a combined curriculum system. Today it is part of the larger family of IKRAM-MUSLEH schools.

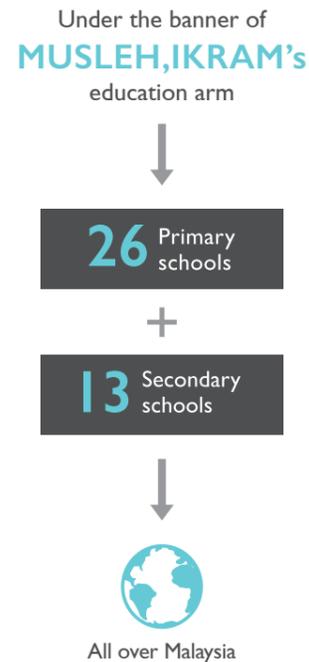
4 Findings

4.1 How are the schools managed?

Each MUSLEH school is governed differently. Sri Al Amin Gombak is part of the Pusat Pendidikan Al-Amin Berhad (PPAAB), which owns three schools; Sekolah Rendah Islam Al-Amin Kuala Lumpur (SRIAACL), Sekolah Rendah Islam Al-Amin Gombak (SRIAAG) and Sekolah Menengah Islam Al-Amin, Gombak (SMIAAG). For this paper we only interviewed SRIAAG and SMIAAG.

PPAAB is registered as an independent business entity. For that reason, SRIAAG and SMIAAG have its own board of directors as well as governors.

The board of directors consists of five members who hold legal responsibility over the entity. The function of the board of directors is to ensure that the school is managed efficiently especially with regards to finances. The board is also responsible for fundraising and overseeing the infrastructure of the school and its facilities. Annual budgets must be cleared by the board of directors especially costs related to capital costs.



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The board of governors on the other hand has 13 members. They have an advisory role meaning that they provide guidance to the school but do not have executive powers.
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Any changes in the school budget such as the need for additional funding to repaint school buildings or building additional classrooms must go through the board. The board of governors on the other hand has 13 members. They have an advisory role meaning that they provide guidance to the school but do not have executive powers. The school administration is headed by the school Principal. The Principal is given the authority to make decisions related to the school's curriculum and the school's personnel. She/He can choose to include additional subjects, hire new teachers and introduce extracurricular activities.

In addition to having control over the hiring of teachers, the school administrator has a say in the school's budget. However, the Principal must first go through the board of directors. In general, operational costs fall under the purview of the school whereas capital costs are approved by the board of directors. The school has autonomy over its operations including how the school is run and the role of teachers. The school however must ensure that they are in line with the vision and mission of MUSLEH as a whole.

4.2 How are MUSLEH schools funded?

MUSLEH schools raise funds through fees, member donations, zakat (alms) collections as well as private donations.

All MUSLEH schools are fee paying schools and this includes SRI/SMIAAG. The fees are affordable at below RM500 a month.

Furthermore, given that the schools are part of IKRAM's missionary work, the schools are generally populated by the children of local members of IKRAM to meet members' needs. As such members also supplement the school's income through local donations⁴.

The school also receives funds from external sources. SRI/SMIAAG has an agreement with the Perlis Religious Department to both collect and receive zakat (alms) money. Under this agreement, SRI/SMIAAG is entitled to keep 50 percent of the total zakat money that they collect. Both IKRAM and SRI/SMIAAG in this sense have secured rights as zakat collectors in Perlis and are able to collect alms from the parents of students as well as private companies that pay zakat to Perlis. Additionally, SRI/SMIAAG as not-for-profit schools are also entitled to receive zakat.

4.3 Why do parents choose these schools?

4.3.1 Lack of Trust in Government Schools

All parents interviewed in our study stated that the quality of education in government schools had deteriorated. However, this was not the main reason why they chose SRI/SMIAAG. Instead, parents expressed their aspirations for their children to receive a good religious foundation that would enable them to be practicing Muslims who adhere to the Quran and Sunnah. This includes having both religious studies as well as 'secular' subjects (parents did not

consider these subjects secular rather than they are an important part of Islam) and they felt that this could only be achieved in a school with an Islamic environment. This is not surprising as most parents adhered to the same principles and vision of IKRAM.

Furthermore, parents also felt that government schools did not provide holistic education and are lacking in spiritual education. Additionally, unlike government schools,

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The school has autonomy over its operations including how the school is run and the role of teachers.
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Apart from fees, member donations and zakat, another source of funds is in private donations. SRI/SMIAAG holds yearly activities to raise donations at the school board level. They hold fundraising dinners, receive donations during events such as sports day and even receive donations from parents.

teachers in SRI/SMIAAG are not burdened by administrative work and have smaller class sizes. The teacher's main priority is to teach and they are neither over-burdened with administrative work nor are they expected to meet State and District Education Department targets. Their only concern is the well-being of the student and with smaller class sizes they are also able to have better interactions with students.

⁴ In fact, in the early years of the school's inception teachers were mostly IKRAM members and were only given a small stipend even though they taught full time.

4.3.2 Identity-Building

Parents were also attracted to the school's focus on "identity-building" and the overall mission of the school to create a "civilised" Islamic society through tarbiyah (education). To them the school would be able to help inculcate Islamic values needed for their children to become strong, humane and God-fearing human beings. Parents also mentioned other identity building activities that the school provided such as youth camps and public speaking training. These activities instilled a sense of community and allowed students to develop self-confidence in addition to a good academic and religious foundation.

One of the most obvious limitations of the schools was the clear lack of racial and religious diversity. All students were of the same faith (Islam) and ethnicity (Malay) with a majority of students coming from a middle class background. This is partly due to the fact that the school fees are still too expensive for families that fall within the bottom 40 percent of income earners. Additionally, the school does not attract parents of different ethnicities and faiths, unlike Catholic schools.

When asked whether or not the lack of diversity would be a setback for their children, one parent replied that they were not too worried as their child's spiritual education would ensure that the child would become compassionate and empathetic towards others.

4.3.3 Social Capital

Another reason why parents chose the schools is the close relationship between parents and teachers. SRI/SMIAAG has a strong Parent Teacher Association and a Parents Club. The Parents Club helps by volunteering at the schools as well as assisting teachers in managing school events and programmes. One parent for instance, had a very good relationship with teachers and even considered them her friends. In the interview she said, "I trust my children with them and they respect me as a parent".

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5 Lessons Learned

Despite the lack of diversity, the schools have certain features that enable them to provide quality education. They are:

5.1. The autonomy to manage its own affairs

The Principal noted that increased freedom results in a different kind of responsibility. Since the schools are not burdened with administrative work or having to meet district and state level targets as in government schools, they are more able to focus on students. This builds a different but healthier kind of pressure on teachers. Teachers spend more time teaching, are able to provide more individualised attention to their students and build better student-teacher relationships. One teacher interviewed, stated that former students would regularly come back to meet teachers and continued to contribute to the school either through donations or in kind donations.

5.2 A close relationship between teachers and parents

The close relationship between teachers and parents increase the sense of responsibility that teachers feel in ensuring that their students do well. Additionally, the close relationship also helped teachers receive more support from parents. This is particularly important when considering studies that have shown how the major influence that families have over their children's achievement in school and through life (Henderson & Mapp 2002). The teachers and staff at SRI/SMIAAG have meaningful relationships with parents and this helps to ensure that parents are more involved with their child's education. This means that the children's learning does not stop after school hours and that there is continuous monitoring and encouragement from parents.

5.3 Extracurricular activities that nurture spiritual strength

Another feature is the role of extracurricular activities in the schools. SRI/SMIAAG stresses on the importance developing spiritual strength. Nurturing spiritually healthy and strong students will inevitably affect student outcomes. It will improve their EQ and provide a strong foundation in developing their interpersonal skills.

For parents at SRI/SMIAAG, quality education is not only measured by academic success but by a strong spiritual identity. They stressed the need for their children to have life skills that go beyond material wealth and success. They all felt strongly about this, believing that being a well-rounded Muslim earlier in life would help their children become better human beings in the future. Parents interviewed felt that this was missing from government schools and hence they preferred to send their children to SRI/SMIAAG.

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Interviews conducted at Sekolah Rendah Islamic Al-Amin, Gombak

School Leaders:

- Puan Norma Ahmad, Principal of SRI Al-Amin, Gombak. She has taught in IKRAM-MUSLEH schools for 25 years.
- Puan Aliya Mohamad, Vice-Principal of SRI AL-Amin, Gombak. She has taught in IKRAM-MUSLEH schools for 12 years and was previously teaching at a government school.

Parents:

- Puan Fauziah Binti Hussein
- Puan Habsah Binti Abu Bakar
- Hasmandin Bin Che Man
- Afidah Binti Mohammed

⁵ Pn. Fauziah Binti Hussein and Pn. Habsah Binti Abu Bakar – Parent.

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