School Based Religious Education in Practice: Evaluating the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program

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A B S T R A C T

The *Sekolah Mengaji* Program is a religious education policy initiated by the Bandung Regency Government as a mandatory local content subject in elementary and junior high schools. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMP Negeri 1 Cangkuang, focusing on the planning, execution, and evaluation stages. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis, involving the principal, Islamic education teachers, *guru mengaji*, and students. The findings indicate that the program was systematically and collaboratively planned, with strong coordination between school stakeholders and teaching staff. Implementation included reading, writing, and memorizing the Qur'an (BTHQ), adapted to students' proficiency levels. Although traditional teaching methods dominate, teachers demonstrated responsive adaptation to students' needs. Evaluation was conducted periodically through progress monitoring and documentation of student achievements. The study concludes that the program has been effectively managed, yet further improvements are needed in instructional innovation and teacher capacity-building to enhance its overall impact.

INTRODUCTION

In facing the global challenges of the 21st century, primary education is required to produce graduates who not only master fundamental knowledge but also possess critical and creative thinking skills, along with adaptability. The role of schools as formal educational institutions becomes crucial in shaping students' character and competencies, especially in the aspect of religiosity, which serves as the moral foundation of the nation. The Bandung Regency Government has responded to this need by launching the *Sekolah Mengaji* (Qur'an School Program) as a mandatory local content subject at both primary and junior secondary school levels (Baehaqi et al., 2024).

The *Sekolah Mengaji* Program is an implementation of Bandung Regent Regulation No. 78 of 2021, which aims to eradicate Qur'anic illiteracy and instill religious moral values in students from an early age. Its implementation goes beyond reading, writing, and memorizing the Qur'an (BTHQ); it also aims to continuously develop students' religious character. Thus, the program serves as a strategic component in building a Qur'anic-based society through schools(Safaringga et al., 2022; Sahidin et al., 2023).

However, the implementation of this program faces several challenges. In the field, obstacles include monotonous teaching methods, limited instructional hours, varying levels of teacher preparedness, and fluctuating student participation(Yulianti, 2024). In some schools, the program is

only conducted once a week for two class periods, which is considered insufficient to achieve the intended objectives. This limitation affects the program's effectiveness in significantly improving students' Qur'anic reading and writing skills(Nopianti & Mulyani, 2022).

These implementation challenges indicate that the success of the program does not rely solely on the existence of policies or instructional materials but is also heavily influenced by managerial readiness at the school level (Hale & Moorman, 2003). School principals, Islamic Education (PAI) teachers, and Qur'an instructors need to establish strong synergy to ensure that program planning, implementation, and evaluation are carried out systematically(Sari, 2024). In this context, the roles of Qur'an instructors and PAI teachers as facilitators and coordinators of the activities become key determinants of the program's success (Nugraha, 2023; Sopiah et al., 2024).

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of school-based religious education and the effectiveness of similar programs. For example, Sahidin et al. (2023) (Sahidin et al., 2023; Sugestian et al., 2017) found that the *Kampus Mengajar* (Teaching Campus) Program could increase student motivation through the reinforcement of religious values. Likewise, (Baehaqi et al., 2024; Permana, 2023) reported that the implementation of *Sekolah Mengaji* at SMPN 2 Dayeuhkolot had a positive impact on students' Qur'anic reading abilities and religious character development. However, these studies have not deeply explored the managerial aspects of program implementation at the school level.

The *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMPN 1 Cangkuang serves as an interesting case for deeper investigation due to its distinctive socio-cultural context and the unique implementation of the program in two learning sessions, driven by the high number of students. Furthermore, the collaboration between Qur'an instructors, PAI teachers, and the school principal in designing schedules, instructional methods, and program evaluations reflects complex implementation dynamics that merit examination as a case study.

The urgency of this research lies in the need for a comprehensive understanding of the managerial processes involved in implementing the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program, from the planning phase to execution and evaluation. By thoroughly understanding practical implementation, the findings of this study are expected to provide relevant recommendations for improving program quality and promoting religious education policies that are more responsive to students' needs.

Although many studies discuss the effectiveness of religious education, most still focus on student outcomes or specific teaching models. A notable gap lies in how schools systematically manage Qur'an programs as part of a strategy to strengthen students' religious character. Therefore, a research approach that focuses on program implementation aspects, including coordination dynamics among educational actors, is relevant and significant for further investigation.

This study aims to analyze and describe the implementation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMPN 1 Cangkuang by focusing on three main aspects: (1) program preparation, (2) program implementation, and (3) program evaluation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach enables researchers to explore and understand the meaning, process, and context of social phenomena in depth, particularly in the context of implementing religious programs in schools (Creswell & Clark, 2017). A case study design was chosen as it provides flexibility in investigating the dynamics and complexities of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program implementation at SMPN 1 Cangkuang as a distinct and integrated unit. Case studies are relevant when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined, and when the researcher aims to gain a holistic

understanding of the interactions among actors and structures within a real-life setting (Adrias & Ruswandi, 2025; Yin, 2017).

The research site was SMP Negeri 1 Cangkuang, Bandung Regency, which was selected purposively as one of the public junior high schools that has implemented the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program since its inception by the Bandung Regency Government. The research subjects consisted of the school principal, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, Qur'an instructors, and students directly involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program.

Data were collected using a triangulation of methods: in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted to obtain rich narratives regarding informants' experiences and perceptions of the program. Observations were carried out on-site to examine the learning process, teacher-student interactions, and the dynamics occurring during program activities. Document analysis included an examination of program materials, syllabi, activity schedules, implementation guidelines, and the school's internal evaluation records (Patton, 2014; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).

In this approach, the researcher functioned as the primary instrument (human instrument), directly engaging in field exploration, interacting with informants, and interpreting the collected data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To support the validity of the process, auxiliary instruments were also used, including interview guidelines, observation sheets, instrument grids, and document analysis formats.

The validity of the data was assessed based on four criteria developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was maintained through source and technique triangulation and by conducting member checks with informants. Transferability was ensured by presenting rich, contextual descriptions (*thick description*). Dependability and confirmability were established through the use of an audit trail and systematic documentation of the analysis process (Miles et al., 2014; Shenton, 2004).

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Miles et al., 2014), consisting of three main stages: (1) data reduction, which involves sorting, simplifying, and organizing raw data into meaningful information; (2) data display, presented in structured narratives, quotations, and thematic matrices; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, which were conducted continuously and reflectively to ensure consistency and accuracy of the findings.

The study was conducted from February to April 2025, encompassing instrument preparation, field data collection, and the process of analysis and report writing. Through this approach, the research is expected to contribute to a contextual understanding of religious program implementation in schools and offer insights for local educational policymakers.

RESULTS

Program Planning of the *Sekolah Mengaji*

Based on research conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Cangkuang, the planning of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program has been carried out systematically by the school, although the overall policies and program structure are determined by the Bandung Regency Government through the Department of Education. The school is responsible for adjusting the schedule, appointing coordinators, and ensuring technical readiness for implementation. The program design includes scheduling, the appointment of Qur'an instructors, and class mapping based on students' Qur'anic reading abilities.

The planning process was not entirely top-down. The school involved Islamic Education (PAI) teachers as field coordinators to bridge communication between the school administration and

Qur'an instructors, as well as to make technical adjustments to the classroom learning conditions. This is illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

> "We were entrusted with responsibility on the ground. We coordinate closely with Qur'an teachers from scheduling to class division. So the school still gives us room to adjust based on student conditions." (PAI Teacher/Program Coordinator, interview, March 12, 2025)

Observations showed that the planning activities began with internal socialization among the principal, PAI teachers, and Qur'an instructors. The scheduling was determined collaboratively, taking into account the school's dual-shift system. The program is implemented every Friday, with separate one-hour sessions in the morning and afternoon.

Program documentation includes an official *Sekolah Mengaji* syllabus issued by the Bandung Regency Department of Education. The document outlines learning outcomes for Qur'anic Reading-Writing-Memorization (BTHQ), lists competency standards per grade level, and provides implementation guidelines. Additionally, the school maintains a posted program schedule on the teachers' notice board, attendance lists for Qur'an instructors, and meeting minutes regarding task allocation.

The principal stated that planning also considers classroom availability and learning materials relevant to students' skill levels:

> "We adjust everything from the number of teachers, the number of classes, to the daily schedule everything must be synchronized. So the students can participate in this program without disrupting their core subjects." (Principal, interview, March 11, 2025)

Findings indicate that although the program's structure originates from regional policy, the school carries out technical planning in a contextual and structured manner. Qur'an instructors are assigned according to their competencies and matched with class groups based on students' proficiency levels. Moreover, the role of the PAI teacher as program coordinator reinforces communication channels among all implementing actors within the school.

Observations further revealed that during planning meetings, Qur'an instructors were given space to offer input regarding more suitable methods for students still at the *Iqra* stage. This reflects a participatory approach in technical planning that, while not fully autonomous, includes relevant school stakeholders.

> "We were invited to discuss student groupings who's still on *Iqra*, who's already moved to *Juz Amma*. So even though there's already a syllabus, the technical details are adjusted in the field." (Qur'an Instructor, interview, March 13, 2025)

This collaborative approach reflects the principle of *shared decision-making*, which enhances ownership of the program and strengthens implementation commitment. The strategy aligns with the concept of *distributed instructional leadership*, which emphasizes multi-actor involvement in educational decision-making (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

The use of supporting documents such as the BTHQ syllabus, implementation schedules, and coordination meeting records demonstrates structured documentation that enhances program accountability. Observations also show that teachers have access to clear teaching materials and performance indicators, enabling a more focused evaluation process.

In conclusion, the planning of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMPN 1 Cangkuang has been carried out systematically and contextually through a collaborative approach involving the school administration, PAI teachers, and Qur'an instructors. Although the policy initiative originates from the regional government, the school has demonstrated adaptive capacity in translating the policy into operational strategies aligned with its internal conditions.

Implementation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program

The implementation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMP Negeri 1 Cangkuang takes place every Friday, with a duration of one instructional hour for both the morning and afternoon sessions, adjusted to the school's dual-shift system. The program is delivered by Qur'an instructors appointed by the Bandung Regency Department of Education, while the school's Islamic Education (PAI) teachers act as field coordinators. The implementation process follows a standardized syllabus for Qur'anic Reading, Writing, and Memorization (BTHQ).

The core activities of the program include Qur'anic recitation, writing, and memorization. Each session begins with a memorization check (*setoran hafalan*), followed by reading practice, and ends with students writing verses in their notebooks. Observations of two instructional sessions revealed that students were grouped according to their Qur'anic reading proficiency, ranging from the *Iqra* level to *Juz 30*. This grouping approach allowed instruction to be more adaptive to students' individual needs.

> "I start with memorization checks to build consistency. Then the students read either *Iqra* or the Qur'an, depending on their level. Lastly, they copy the verses for writing practice and memorization reinforcement." (Qur'an Instructor, interview, March 13, 2025)

Program documentation obtained by the researchers includes the BTHQ syllabus, teacher guidebooks, and student attendance logs for each session. Additionally, individual student evaluation forms were used by instructors to record progress in memorization and reading. Observations showed that teachers regularly gave written feedback and signed off on students' memorization and writing tasks as a form of immediate assessment.

The predominant teaching methods were traditional, such as lecturing, round-robin reading, and individual assignments. Some instructors also implemented peer tutoring methods, where more proficient readers assisted classmates at the beginner level. However, limited instructional time and a school policy prohibiting mobile device use posed challenges to innovating teaching strategies.

> "We use classical methods, like in traditional madrasahs. Since phones aren't allowed in school, we do what we can with what we have. But thank God, the students are still enthusiastic." (Qur'an Instructor, interview, March 14, 2025)

Program implementation is overseen strictly by the PAI teacher in the role of coordinator. According to interview findings, the PAI teacher monitors each session and serves as the liaison between the Qur'an instructors and the principal to address any issues or resource needs. Observations confirmed the PAI teacher's active role in accompanying classroom activities, documenting class dynamics, and occasionally offering direct motivation to students.

> "I go into the classrooms and monitor the sessions. If problems arise, I help resolve them for example, when a student doesn't have a mushaf or workbook." (PAI Teacher/Program Coordinator, interview, March 12, 2025)

One of the main challenges identified in program implementation is the limited instructional time. The split-shift format restricts each group to only one hour of instruction, which affects the depth of teacher-student interaction and the pace of achieving BTHQ targets. Observations indicated that sessions were dense, with minimal time for reflection or open discussion.

The program schedule and class distribution documents demonstrate the school's efforts to align the program structure with internal constraints. Scheduling was determined through deliberation and approved by both the school principal and program coordinator. The class and instructor assignments were adjusted to maintain an optimal student-to-teacher ratio, despite resource limitations.

Although the teaching methods remain largely traditional, the personalized approach adopted by Qur'an instructors fostered a warm learning environment and encouraged active student

participation. Interviews showed that most students welcomed the program as an opportunity to strengthen their Qur'anic reading skills something they may not regularly practice at home.

> "Now I recite Qur'an more often because I have to submit memorization every Friday. I didn't know many short surahs before, but now I've memorized up to Surah Al-Mulk." (Grade VIII Student, interview, March 13, 2025)

In conclusion, the implementation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMPN 1 Cangkuang is carried out in a structured and consistent manner, despite facing challenges such as limited instructional time, a lack of teaching method variation, and the need to further build instructor capacity. Overall, the program reflects the school's collective commitment to ensuring its continuity and aligning its implementation with the overarching goal of strengthening students' religious character.

Evaluation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program

The evaluation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMP Negeri 1 Cangkuang is conducted regularly by the Islamic Education (PAI) teacher acting as the program coordinator, with support from the school principal and participation from Qur'an instructors. The evaluation focuses on three key aspects: students' achievement in Qur'anic reading and memorization competencies, the effectiveness of teaching methods, and the level of student participation. The evaluation process is conducted both informally and formally through in-class monitoring, reflective teacher discussions, and routine reporting of learning outcomes.

According to interviews with the PAI teacher, evaluations are conducted at the end of each month by reviewing students' progress in memorization and reading skills. These results are compiled into weekly reports that serve as the basis for follow-up interventions, such as assigning students to remedial groups or adjusting the learning materials.

> "We evaluate students' progress at the end of every month. If some students are still struggling, we place them in a special group for more intensive guidance." (PAI Teacher/Program Coordinator, interview, March 12, 2025)

Documents collected by the researchers include student memorization assessment forms, attendance records, and daily teaching logs maintained by Qur'an instructors. These documents contain performance indicators such as reading fluency, tajwid accuracy, and the number of surahs memorized. Each indicator is rated qualitatively (Good, Fair, Needs Guidance) and is updated periodically.

Field observations revealed that although not all students had reached the memorization targets outlined in the syllabus, most showed positive progress. Qur'an instructors provided motivational support and paid attention to individual learning needs, especially for students who were not yet fluent in reading the Qur'an.

> "Some children still struggle with fluency, but we're patient. What matters is that they keep trying, and I assess their progress every week." (Qur'an Instructor, interview, March 14, 2025)

Supporting factors for program success include adequate infrastructure, such as the availability of Qur'ans (*mushaf*) and memorization notebooks. Observations showed that classrooms are used in rotation based on the schedule, and instructors have access to teaching materials and evaluation documentation. Additionally, the high motivation of Qur'an instructors has been a key success factor.

> "We feel a moral responsibility to help children learn to read the Qur'an. If not at school, they may not have the opportunity at home." (Qur'an Instructor, interview, March 13, 2025)

Government support also plays an important role, particularly through incentives provided to Qur'an instructors and formal recognition of their role within the school's educational framework. This has encouraged teachers to take their responsibilities seriously and approach the *Sekolah Mengaji* activities with a high level of professionalism.

However, the evaluation also identified several challenges. The use of conventional teaching methods remains a limitation, as instructors have received little training in modern pedagogy. In addition, student interest tends to decline when lessons are delivered in a monotonous manner. Observations indicated that students were more engaged when the session included interactive methods such as group reading or Q&A activities.

"If they're only asked to read and memorize, they get bored over time. But if we add group work or a small game, they get excited again." (Qur'an Instructor, interview, March 14, 2025)

Another challenge is the limited time allocated for the program, which runs only one hour per week. This short duration has affected the learning pace, especially for students still at the *Iqra* level. The school is aware of this constraint and is working on solutions, including offering additional sessions outside regular class hours for students who are falling behind.

Overall, the evaluation indicates that the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMP Negeri 1 Cangkuang has had a positive impact on students' Qur'anic reading and memorization skills. Although challenges persist, the program continues to run consistently and shows encouraging progress. The existence of evaluation instruments and documentation of learning outcomes reflects an awareness of the importance of monitoring and continuous improvement.

Through a reflective approach, internal school support, and strong teacher involvement, the evaluation component of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program serves as an integral part of efforts to improve the quality of religious education at the junior secondary level.

DISCUSSION

The first finding regarding the planning of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMPN 1 Cangkuang indicates that the school principal, together with the Islamic Education (PAI) teachers and Qur'an instructors, collaboratively designed the schedule and task allocation in a systematic manner. This approach reflects the concept of *distributed instructional leadership*, in which decision-making roles are shared among various school actors (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). This is consistent with findings from a study in Greece, which revealed that school leadership competencies strongly correlate with the quality of educational work (Kounatidou & Pantelidou, 2025), supporting the importance of collaborative engagement in planning processes.

In terms of implementation, the adaptive practices of Qur'an instructors such as grouping students based on *Iqra–Juz* levels demonstrate a responsive approach to actual classroom needs. Although conducted within a conventional methodological framework, this personalized strategy reflects pedagogical adaptability. According to(Rasdiana et al., 2024), effective supervision and strong instructional leadership influence teachers' professional competence, underscoring the role of context and instructional method in motivating and enhancing teaching performance.

Findings on program evaluation show that the school actively monitors students' progress and provides remedial interventions. This reflects a practice of critical reflective learning aimed at both teacher and student development. (Huber & Pruitt, 2024) observed that comprehensive support for school leadership through coaching, consultancy, and financial assistance resulted in significantly improved leadership quality and school practices. While no external funding support was observed in this study, the reflective and adaptive patterns within the school reflect a similar spirit of building internal program effectiveness.

A key challenge identified lies in the limited duration of instruction and the continued reliance on traditional methods. This aligns with the finding that the absence of modern pedagogical training among Qur'an instructors hampers instructional innovation. A study in Abu Dhabi noted that teachers with a disposition toward lifelong learning demonstrated higher adaptability in professional development (Fidalgo et al., 2025), suggesting that similar professionalization efforts are relevant for Qur'an instructors and PAI teachers.

Although digital media or educational technologies have not yet been integrated into the program, there is a clear need for innovation such as video-based learning or instructional simulations as tools for professional competence development. (Lejonberg et al., 2025) concluded that video-based instructional design can authentically support educators' professional growth, provided the design is implemented with care. This could become a future initiative to make the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program more diverse and engaging.

The use of formal rubrics and documentation in the evaluation process reflects a commitment to accountability and quality. This aligns with literature on teacher professionalism, which emphasizes the importance of clear and competent evaluation instruments to accelerate teaching improvement and learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The current use of qualitative evaluation scales such as "good fair needs guidance" already reflects a strategy of authentic assessment that could be further developed.

The school's reflective evaluation culture also illustrates an awareness of the importance of continuous improvement. This corresponds with the narrative approach in leadership development, in which reflection on lived experience forms the foundation for professional growth among teachers and school leaders (Ferreira et al., 2025).

While the program has informally improved students' Qur'anic reading and memorization abilities, the system's overall effectiveness must continue to evolve particularly through structured training for Qur'an instructors to adopt contemporary pedagogical approaches. (Harkins-Brown et al., 2024) demonstrated that a competency-based approach in continuing education significantly enhances educators' knowledge and self-efficacy indicating that systematic training for Qur'an instructors would accelerate learning quality improvement.

Findings also reveal that internal school support such as the provision of Qur'ans, memorization notebooks, and classroom facilities contributes to the program's effectiveness. This is aligned with the view that effective educational leadership involves not only pedagogical decision-making but also inclusive resource management (Huber & Pruitt, 2024).

Overall, the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMPN 1 Cangkuang demonstrates strong potential as a model for contextual, adaptive, and reflective academic supervision. The findings support the importance of collaborative instructional leadership, systematic documentation, and continuous evaluation as key foundations for professional teacher development.

However, to strengthen its position as a comprehensive school strategy, the program should be expanded into a teacher capability development phase through both formal professional training and the application of innovative instructional media. In doing so, a program initially launched as a regional policy initiative may evolve into a high-impact, school-driven educational excellence model.
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CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the implementation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMP Negeri 1 Cangkuang has been carried out systematically and adaptively through three key stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. During the planning phase, the school acted as the executor of regional policy by adapting the program to its internal context. The planning process was collaborative, involving Islamic Education (PAI) teachers as coordinators and Qur'an instructors as

technical implementers, reflecting a participatory instructional leadership approach. The implementation phase demonstrated the strong commitment of the school and teachers to delivering the program in a structured manner, despite being predominantly based on conventional teaching methods. The core activities reading, writing, and memorizing the Qur'an were carried out with student groupings based on reading proficiency. The learning process was adaptive; however, time constraints and a lack of methodological innovation emerged as significant challenges. In the evaluation phase, it was found that the program has a monitoring system that supports reflective practice and continuous improvement. Evaluations were conducted regularly using qualitative assessment formats and documentation of student progress. The findings indicated positive development, although not all students fully met the learning targets. The evaluation also highlighted that teacher motivation, availability of learning resources, and managerial support from the school are key success factors for the program. In conclusion, the implementation of the *Sekolah Mengaji* Program at SMPN 1 Cangkuang demonstrates its effectiveness as a contextual and collaborative religious education strategy. Nevertheless, strengthening teacher capacity, innovating instructional methods, and optimizing instructional time are areas that require further enhancement to maximize the program's impact on Qur'anic literacy and the development of students' religious character.

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