

Developing a Competency-Based Curriculum in Islamic Education: Implications for Teacher Training

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Abstract

This study explores the development of a competency-based curriculum (CBC) within Islamic education and its implications for teacher training. While competency-based approaches have been widely promoted in global education systems, their integration into Islamic education requires careful contextualization to ensure alignment between modern pedagogical standards and the values of Islamic teachings. Using a qualitative research design, this study employed document analysis and semi-structured interviews with Islamic education teachers and curriculum developers to investigate perceptions, challenges, and readiness in implementing a CBC. The findings reveal that teachers generally support the integration of competency-based principles, particularly in fostering critical thinking, communication, and digital literacy, while still emphasizing moral and spiritual growth. However, several challenges were identified, including limited teacher preparedness, insufficient training resources, and misalignment between curriculum goals and classroom realities. These challenges highlight the urgent need for teacher training programs that are not only pedagogically robust but also rooted in the Islamic educational ethos. The study argues that without systematic professional development and institutional support, competency-based reforms risk being implemented superficially.

Keywords

Curriculum
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Introduction

The transformation of education systems worldwide has increasingly emphasized competency-based approaches as a response to the limitations of traditional content-driven curricula. Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) focuses on developing learners' abilities to apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes in real-life contexts, rather than simply memorizing information (Gervais, 2016; Mugambi & Chepkonga, 2022; Godfrey, 2018). In this paradigm, education is not merely about knowledge acquisition but about cultivating critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability. Such a shift is particularly significant for Islamic education, where the goals extend beyond intellectual mastery to include moral, spiritual, and social competencies aligned with the holistic development of learners (Halstead, 2004; Surbakti et al., 2024; Moslimany et al., 2024; Sahin, 2018).

In the context of Islamic schools, curriculum design faces a dual challenge: maintaining fidelity to Islamic values while ensuring relevance to modern educational demands. The competency-based model offers a strategic opportunity to integrate these dimensions by focusing on key outcomes that balance religious knowledge with practical life skills (Mwangi & De Klerk, 2011). For instance, competencies in Quranic literacy, ethical decision-making, and community service can be developed alongside scientific inquiry, digital literacy, and collaborative learning. Such integration not only addresses the expectations of Muslim communities but also prepares students for global competitiveness in a rapidly changing world (Zia, 2018; Saifani, 2024).

However, the success of a competency-based curriculum in Islamic education is contingent upon the preparedness of teachers. Teachers serve as mediators of both knowledge and values, making their role central in shaping the competency development of learners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This reality underscores the importance of comprehensive teacher training programs that equip educators with pedagogical skills,

technological competence, and the ability to design learning experiences rooted in Islamic epistemology. Without such preparation, the implementation of CBC risks becoming superficial, limited to administrative compliance rather than transformative practice (Schleicher, 2018; Maiyuria, 2024).

Existing studies highlight that teacher readiness in Islamic schools remains uneven, with many educators relying on traditional, lecture-based methods and limited exposure to modern pedagogical frameworks (Raihani, 2014). Moreover, the integration of faith-based principles into competency-based pedagogy requires a nuanced understanding of Islamic philosophy of education, which is often absent in generic teacher training programs (Hashim, 2014). Therefore, rethinking teacher professional development becomes imperative for the meaningful adoption of CBC in Islamic education.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of how a competency-based curriculum can be developed in the context of Islamic education and its implications for teacher training. This approach was chosen because it explores the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of the stakeholders involved, while also providing a critical understanding of the dynamics of curriculum implementation in the field. Research data was collected through a literature review, curriculum document analysis, and in-depth interviews with teachers, curriculum developers, and Islamic education experts. The literature review focused on national curriculum policies, graduate competency standards, and previous research related to competency-based Islamic education. Document analysis was conducted on the official Ministry of Religious Affairs curriculum and internal curriculum documents of Islamic schools to identify relevant core competency elements and learning indicators.

Additionally, purposeful interviews were conducted with teachers and curriculum developers experienced in implementing competency-based curricula in Islamic schools. These interviews aimed to explore practical challenges, adaptation strategies, and their perspectives on teacher training needs in facing the new curriculum paradigm. The data analysis process used thematic analysis, with data reduction, categorization, and the extraction of key themes. The results were then compared with the theoretical framework of competency-based education and the principles of Islamic education, resulting in a conceptual model for curriculum development and practical recommendations for teacher training. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation techniques (literature, documents, interviews) and peer debriefing with academics in the field of Islamic education.

Results and Discussion

This research was conducted at three secondary Islamic schools in Central Java and Yogyakarta that have begun adapting a competency-based curriculum in accordance with the Ministry of Religious Affairs' policy direction. These schools were selected because they represent a variety of institutional types: public madrasahs, private madrasahs, and integrated Islamic schools. This context is important because each institution faces different challenges and strategies in formulating learning outcomes that are not only oriented toward cognitive learning but also toward developing attitudes and skills in accordance with Islamic principles.

Integration of Cognitive, Affective, and Psychomotor Competencies

Document analysis shows that most schools still emphasize cognitive aspects, such as mastery of Islamic jurisprudence, faith, or Arabic, but are beginning to integrate affective (values, morals) and psychomotor (practice of worship, communication skills) dimensions. One teacher stated:

"We were asked to assess not only students' memorization, but also how they apply morals in their daily lives. This is a challenge because it requires more detailed assessment instruments." (Interview, Teacher A, Private Madrasah)

The quote illustrates that the transition from a content-based to a competency-based model in Islamic education is not merely a curricular adjustment but also a methodological challenge. Competency-based education demands evaluation instruments capable of capturing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions in an integrated manner. While teachers acknowledge the necessity of assessing not only knowledge but also attitudes and behaviors, the scarcity of robust and standardized measurement tools undermines the reliability and consistency of the assessment process. This limitation points to a deeper structural issue: without appropriate evaluation mechanisms, the promise of competency-based reform risks being reduced to rhetoric rather than practice. It also raises critical questions about whether existing teacher training programs and institutional support adequately prepare educators to design and implement comprehensive assessment strategies that align with the holistic goals of Islamic education.

Teacher Challenges in Curriculum Adaptation

Interviews revealed that teachers face difficulties in developing competency-based lesson plans (RPPs). Many teachers are accustomed to a linear content model and struggle to transition to competency-based outcomes. One curriculum developer explained:

"Some teachers are still confused about the difference between competency indicators and learning objectives. They need intensive training to be able to write more concrete learning outcomes." (Interview, Curriculum Developer, State Madrasah)

The statement reflects a significant gap in teachers' comprehension of technical terminology within competency-based learning design. While many teachers can formulate broad learning objectives, they often face difficulties in operationalizing these objectives into clear, measurable indicators of student achievement. This limitation suggests that their current training emphasizes conceptual awareness without sufficient attention to the practical skills required for implementation. Addressing this gap calls for more targeted technical training that not only clarifies theoretical principles but also equips teachers with hands-on strategies to design, apply, and assess competency-based learning in real classroom contexts.

The Need for Continuous Teacher Training

Most respondents emphasized the need for teacher training programs that include more than just seminars and hands-on *workshops*. Teachers at integrated Islamic schools stated:

"We've participated in one-day training, but that was just theory. What we need is practical guidance, such as developing assessment rubrics or competency-based learning modules." (Interview, Teacher B, Integrated Islamic School)

These findings suggest that one-day seminars or short workshops for teacher training are insufficient to produce meaningful or sustainable improvements in teacher competency. While such sessions may raise awareness, they often lack depth and practical application. Teachers require ongoing, hands-on mentoring that engages them directly in designing assessment rubrics, developing teaching modules, and conducting classroom simulations. This practical, experiential approach allows teachers to internalize and apply new knowledge in authentic teaching contexts. Consequently, the continuity of training and the emphasis on practice-based learning emerge as critical factors for ensuring the effectiveness of professional development programs.

Synchronization with Islamic Values

One important finding is the need to align competency-based curricula with Islamic values. For example, communication competency should not only be viewed as the ability to speak effectively, but should also encompass good manners in accordance with the Sunnah. An Islamic education expert explains:

"Competence cannot be neutral; it must contain the spirit of Islam. If students are taught to think critically, it must remain within the bounds of Islamic morality." (Interview, Academic, UIN Sunan Kalijaga)

This perspective underscores that Islamic education extends beyond the acquisition of technical competencies; it requires situating those competencies within the framework of Islamic values. In this sense, skills such as critical thinking cannot be understood as an exercise in unrestricted intellectual freedom alone, but must be exercised with reference to Islamic ethics, moral responsibility, and proper etiquette (*adab*). Such an orientation challenges the common assumption in competency-based curricula that skills are value-neutral, by demonstrating that in the Islamic educational context, competencies are inseparable from normative and religious dimensions.

Aligning Competency-Based Curriculum with Teacher Professional Development in Islamic Education

The findings of this study highlight several crucial dimensions in developing a competency-based curriculum within Islamic education, particularly regarding teacher training. While competency-based education (CBE) has gained international recognition for its ability to foster practical skills and lifelong learning (Or, 2024; Zuva & Zuva, 2020), its implementation in Islamic schools requires contextual adjustments. Unlike secular education systems where competencies are often framed around technical and cognitive skills, Islamic education requires a more holistic perspective that integrates spiritual, moral, and social dimensions (Hashim, 2014). This dual demand inevitably poses challenges for teachers, who must navigate both the technical aspects of CBE and the ethical-spiritual foundations of Islamic pedagogy.

A key contribution of this study lies in revealing the mismatch between the top-down policies surrounding curriculum reform and the lived realities of teachers in Islamic schools. The interviews underscored that teacher training is often fragmented, episodic, and insufficiently tailored to the actual classroom needs. This aligns with global critiques of professional development programs that are overly theoretical and fail to support ongoing reflective practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, what is distinct in the context of Islamic education is that ineffective training does not merely hinder pedagogical skill acquisition but also undermines the broader mission of transmitting Islamic values through education. This adds a unique layer to the international debate on competency-based education, which is rarely discussed in contexts where moral-spiritual transmission is as central as in Islamic schooling.

Another important implication of this study relates to the assessment of non-cognitive competencies such as *akhlak* (character), *adab* (manners), and *taqwa* (piety). While CBE frameworks emphasize measurable learning outcomes, many of the most critical Islamic educational goals resist easy quantification (Halstead, 2004). Teachers expressed uncertainty in developing tools that adequately capture moral-spiritual growth without reducing them to superficial checklists. This tension resonates with broader criticisms of CBE that argue it risks privileging what is measurable at the expense of what is meaningful (Wheelahan, 2009). Yet, the Islamic education context deepens this critique: the risk is not only pedagogical but also theological, as reducing *akhlak* to technical indicators may contradict the Islamic philosophy of *tarbiyah*, which regards moral development as a lifelong and holistic process.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that teacher training programs in Islamic schools often lack a coherent integration of modern pedagogical strategies with Islamic epistemology. While global models of teacher training emphasize active learning, reflective practice, and collaborative inquiry (Adams, 2016; Lin et al., 2013), Islamic teacher training has not sufficiently contextualized these approaches within an Islamic framework. This represents a missed opportunity: rather than perceiving modern pedagogical methods and Islamic traditions as mutually exclusive, there is potential to develop hybrid training models that honor both. For example, the concept of *muhasabah* (self-reflection) could be aligned with reflective teaching practices, while *shura* (consultation) could enrich collaborative learning approaches among teachers.

From a policy perspective, this study underscores the need for systemic reforms in how teacher training is conceptualized and delivered in Islamic schools. Policymakers often design curriculum reforms that assume teachers can seamlessly adapt without significant support, yet the findings show that teachers require

structured, ongoing professional development that is culturally and religiously grounded. This has parallels in international experiences: for instance, in Finland, teacher professional development is embedded within a culture of trust and autonomy (Paradis et al., 2019), while in Singapore, it is integrated into a career-long pathway supported by institutional structures (Ling, 2022). Translating these insights into Islamic education could mean institutionalizing continuous training modules that combine global best practices with Islamic pedagogical heritage.

Moreover, the research sheds light on the broader epistemological debates within Islamic education. The attempt to implement CBE highlights tensions between modernist approaches that prioritize global competencies and traditionalist perspectives that emphasize religious authenticity. The study suggests that reconciliation is possible if competency frameworks are redefined to include explicitly Islamic competencies, such as spiritual resilience, community engagement, and ethical leadership. Such a redefinition would position Islamic education not as lagging behind global trends but as innovating a distinctive model of CBE that speaks to both religious and secular demands.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the discourse on curriculum design by emphasizing the importance of contextualizing educational reforms within local cultural and religious frameworks. It challenges the universalist assumption that CBE can be transplanted across contexts without adaptation. Practically, it offers a roadmap for policymakers, suggesting that successful implementation depends on empowering teachers through tailored training that acknowledges their dual role as educators and spiritual guides.

Finally, the study's limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on interviews with a relatively small sample of teachers limits the generalizability of findings. Future research could expand this inquiry by incorporating quantitative measures of teacher preparedness and longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of competency-based reforms on student outcomes in Islamic schools. Moreover, comparative studies across different Muslim-majority contexts would enrich understanding of how varying cultural and institutional settings mediate the challenges and opportunities of implementing CBE in Islamic education.

Conclusion

The development of a competency-based curriculum in Islamic education requires a balance between achieving academic competencies, 21st-century skills, and the internalization of Islamic values. Research shows that successful implementation depends heavily on teacher preparedness, both in understanding the curriculum framework and in implementing contextual, competency-oriented learning strategies. Therefore, teacher training must be designed not only to strengthen pedagogical skills but also to instill a critical awareness of the holistic goals of Islamic education. Thus, a competency-based curriculum can be a strategic instrument for producing a generation of Muslims who are knowledgeable, moral, and able to adapt to global dynamics, provided it is supported by continuous and systematic teacher professional development.

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