

# Modernizing the madrasa curriculum in Singapore

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## Abstract

*The madrasa curriculum in Singapore continues to modernize to keep up with the times. At the beginning of its establishment, the madrasa curriculum in Singapore was focused on learning the Qur'an and Islamic sciences. However, as time progressed, the madrasa curriculum began to undergo changes. This article aims to explain the process of curriculum modernization in Singapore madrasas as a large part of Singapore's national education goals, and what changes have occurred in relation to curriculum design. This research method uses a qualitative approach with a combined research model between library research and field studies. Data and information from the field were collected from Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa, one of the madrasas in eastern Singapore. The type of research to be carried out is included in the form of descriptive qualitative, which is a form of research that aims to collect and compile data and try to analyze with interpretation or interpretation of these data. Furthermore, in analyzing the data, the author uses two methods, namely the content analysis method (content analysis) and the descriptive analysis method, especially educational analysis. The results showed that modernization in the curriculum in Singapore Madrasas occurred due to several policies set by the Singapore Ministry of Education with the aim that graduates of madrasa students could be useful not only for the Muslim community, but also for the nation. From the madrasa used as data sources, it can be seen that the curriculum changes in Madrasah Al-Ma'rif was only in the learning system and curriculum materials. Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasah maintains ukhrawi (religious) materials as the main curriculum material, and only adds some secular (academic) materials. While the curriculum model of the madrasa still uses the academic subject model with a separated subject curriculum approach.*

**Keywords:** Curriculum; Islamic Education; Madrasa

## Abstrak

Kurikulum madrasah di Singapura terus mengalami modernisasi untuk mengikuti perkembangan zaman. Di awal pendiriannya, kurikulum madrasah di Singapura difokuskan untuk mempelajari Al-Qur'an dan ilmu-ilmu Islam. Namun, seiring dengan perkembangan waktu, kurikulum madrasah mulai mengalami perubahan. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan proses modernisasi kurikulum di madrasah Singapura sebagai bagian besar dari tujuan pendidikan nasional Singapura, dan apa saja perubahan-perubahan yang terjadi terkait dengan desain kurikulumnya. Metode penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan model penelitian gabungan antara *library research*

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(penelitian kepustakaan) dan studi lapangan. Data dan informasi dari lapangan dikumpulkan dari Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah, salah satu madrasah yang ada di kawasan timur Singapura. Jenis penelitian yang akan dilakukan termasuk dalam bentuk deskriptif kualitatif, yaitu bentuk penelitian yang bertujuan mengumpulkan dan menyusun data serta mengolah dengan analisis secara interpretasi atau penafsiran terhadap data-data tersebut. Selanjutnya dalam menganalisa data, penulis menggunakan dua metode, yaitu metode analisis isi (*content analysis*) dan metode deskriptif analisis, khususnya analisis kependidikan. Hasilnya didapat bahwa modernisasi dalam kurikulum di madrasah Singapura terjadi karena beberapa kebijakan yang ditetapkan oleh Kementerian Pendidikan Singapura dengan tujuan agar para lulusan siswa madrasah bisa bermanfaat tidak saja untuk komunitas muslim, tapi juga untuk nasional. Dari madrasah yang dijadikan sumber data terlihat bahwa perubahan kurikulum hanya terjadi pada sistem pembelajaran dan materi kurikulumnya, yaitu tetap mempertahankan materi-materi ukhrawi (agama) sebagai materi utama kurikulumnya, dan hanya menambahkan beberapa materi-materi sekular (akademik) saja. Sedangkan model kurikulum madrasah masih tetap menggunakan model subyek akademik dengan pendekatan kurikulum terpisah (*separated subject curriculum*).

**Kata kunci:** Kurikulum; Pendidikan Islam; Madrasah

## Introduction

Madrasahs are one of the Islamic educational institutions in Singapore. They are also one of the components of education in Singapore. They fall within the scope of the *National Education (NE)* goals launched in 1997. As an important aspect of *Character and Citizenship Education (CCE)*, national education aims to provide students with the knowledge, skills and values to understand history, realities, challenges, appreciate the journey to nationhood, cultivate the instinct for survival as a nation, and have confidence in the nation's future; Empower and aspire, and foster individual understanding, to nurture engaged citizens who are socially aware, adept at critical thinking, and informed about local, regional and global issues; and Help learners explore their national identity as Singaporeans and cultivate a strong sense of belonging, reality and hope that motivates them to play a contributory role in their own communities and the country as they strive to achieve their personal life goals (MoE, 2022).

The term 'madrasa' is legally and colloquially defined today as 'religious school'. The development of such religious schools in Singapore dates back to the introduction of Islam in the early 15th century, through the medieval era (1400-1800s), the colonial era (1908-1945) and the present modern era (1945-2000) (Sudrajat, 2000). The earliest forms of religious schools in Singapore were basic and informal. These took the form of Qur'anic schools and pondok schools, usually centered on a single religious teacher who taught Islam to the students. This model of Qur'anic schools and pondok schools flourished from the 15th

century to the late 19th century. As the earliest informal Islamic educational institution, Qur'anic schools were conducted in the palace halls of the Malay royal court where teachers taught Islam privately. Then it began to develop teaching in the home of the *ustadz*, in the mosque or in the surau. Qur'anic schools focused on mastering the Arabic language with the aim of facilitating memorization and recitation of the Qur'an (Adawiah, 2018).

During this period, students were not taught to learn the principles of the Qur'an to understand their social, moral, political and economic roles as presented in the Qur'an. The students are only taught the five daily prayers, fasting, the pilgrimage to Mecca, the pillars of faith, some forms of prayer and Arabic songs. The aim is for students to grow up in the Islamic tradition. Although the approach to Islamic education is admittedly narrow, students of the Qur'anic school can go on to learn the Malay language, which is then written in the *jawi* script, in due course they will be appointed as teachers (Mokhtar, 2010).

Another type of Islamic educational institution that later emerged was the school hut or *pesantren* (*funduq* in Arabic), which literally means inn or hotel. This educational institution resembles a boarding school because the students live in simple huts built around the house of the cleric. It is a private institution usually founded by a well-known religious teacher. The subjects taught in the *pondok* include Islamic theology (*tawhid*), Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), *fiqh*, hadith, Arabic grammar (*nahwu*), Islamic Sufism, and Islamic history (*tarikh*). These subjects are taught through memorization and copying of Islamic texts. Criticism of *pondok* schools was then aimed at the limited method of teaching Islam. Despite its shortcomings, it is important to note that *pondok* significantly contributed towards the 'eradication of myths and legends' that were widespread in Malay texts and society during the Hindu era (Kosim, 2011).

The first recorded madrasa in Singapore was Madrasah Al-Sibyan (1905-1923), established in 1905 at Bussorah Road in the vicinity of the Sultan Mosque. Despite its name, Al-Sibyan was more like a *pondok* than a madrasa. Al-Sibyan was run by an Indonesian religious teacher who taught at his home on Bussorah Street. The main focus of education at Al-Sibyan is memorizing the Qur'an. Al-Sibyan moved to Lorong Engku Aman in Geylang Serai around 1923 (Kosim, 2011). Unfortunately, little is known about Al-Sibyan after that year. However, it is clear that Al-Sibyan has long ceased operations as there are no *pondok* in Singapore today.

Later on, muslim reformers realized the limitations of the *pondok* model of schooling during the colonial era. These reformers were dissatisfied with the

pattern of Islamic education taught in the huts, which they felt gave too much attention to worship and basic Islamic rituals (*fardhu a'in*) and did not adequately prepare Muslim students for socio-economic development and employment opportunities. The establishment of early Madrasas in Singapore by Muslim reformers during the colonial era came to be regarded as the emergence of 'modernist institutions' that were lauded for their efforts to evolve Islamic education from traditional forms to more westernized structures, albeit limited ones.

The first modern madrasah in Singapore was established on February 4, 1908, under Madrasah Al-Iqbal Al-Islamiah (1908-1909). It was located at 107 Selegie Road. It was founded by an Islamic reformer, Syed Sheikh Ahmad al-Hadi, a leading figure in Malay journalism, who in turn was influenced by Islamic reformers Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. Compared to its predecessors, Madrasah Al-Iqbal was modern and revolutionary. In terms of pedagogy, it taught insight and reasoning, using debate and rhetoric methods instead of traditional rote learning. The curriculum integrates a wide range of subjects, from religious topics such as Qur'an recitation, Arabic language and grammar, and Islamic ethics, to more secular subjects such as geography, history, math, English, and urban planning. The founder has also improved the madrasa's school year, introduced a new examination system, and established proper rules and regulations (Mokhtar, 2018).

After the end of World War II in 1945, education became very important to Singapore which sought to ensure economic survival after independence. As a result, more Madrasas sought to stay relevant by including secular subjects in their curriculum. By the time Singapore achieved self-government in 1959, the number of Madrasas had doubled from 6 to 12. The number of Madrasas, and the students attending such institutions, swelled further during the period of amalgamation between Singapore and Malaysia (1963-1965), with the highest number reaching 28 Muslim schools in 1962. Another report claims a peak of 26 Madrasas in Singapore in 1966 (Radzi, Sari & Irwandi, 2019). In subsequent developments, the popularity of Madrasas declined with the emergence of national schools. Many madrasas were closed down. The previously shining role of madrasas in Singapore as regional beacons of knowledge during the colonial era was diminished in the post-independence era. The role of Madrasas became limited as the sole production of religious teachers and officials for the local community.

Madrasas in Singapore have their unique history, identity, vision and mission. However, they all have in common a general philosophy of education

rooted in Islamic tradition and values that have a progressive modern outlook. These madrasas have also adapted and evolved in line with Singapore's national education landscape. Today, the curriculum of full-time madrasas has evolved to follow the Singapore national curriculum by incorporating general academic subjects such as English, Math, Science, starting from primary to Pre-U level. The Islamic studies curriculum has also changed over time taking into account the context of Singapore's socio-cultural realities.

Several journals have discussed curriculum modernization in Singapore madrasas. For example, Mokhtar (2010) discusses the role of madrasas and their relevance in the Singapore education system and also looks at the resources through which these institutions are managed. Then Steiner (2011) who analyzed the differences between tradition and modernity of Islamic religious education in Singapore, and the changes made to the curriculum to adapt to the needs of society. Tan, C. & Abbas, D.B. (2017) which discusses a case study of curriculum reform in a madrasa in Singapore and the main challenges faced by madrasas in Singapore in their efforts to reform madrasa education. Tan, C. & Abbas, D.B. also explained about the government's efforts in modernizing the madrasah curriculum in Singapore, including providing funds for new curricular development, hiring more qualified teachers, and modernizing equipment and facilities. Helmiati (2021) discusses an exploration of the challenges and reforms of madrasah education in a secular, modern and multicultural state. Overall, these journals provide insights into the challenges and efforts to modernize the madrasa curriculum in Singapore. They highlight the need to balance traditional Islamic teachings with modern education standards and employment needs.

In general, the article to be written has a similar theme to the one discussed. The difference is that this article focuses on the process of modernizing the Singapore madrasa curriculum through a case study in one of Singapore's eastern madrasas. This article also looks at what changes the madrasa curriculum has undergone regarding its curriculum design to keep pace with the policies issued by the Singapore Ministry of Education, as a large part of the implementation of Singapore's national education goals.

## **Research Methods**

This article uses a qualitative approach, which is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of speech, writing, and behavior that can be observed from the person (subject) itself (Bungin, 2007). The type of qualitative used is a combination of two research methods, namely qualitative field study research and qualitative literature study research. As qualitative research, this

article is not to test hypotheses but to present data and process it descriptively about the formulation of the problem. Therefore, the author tries to record activities that occur in the field, observe them, and collect data from both direct and indirect sources.

Qualitative methods use several forms of data collection such as offline and online interview transcripts, observation descriptions, and analysis of documents and other artifacts (Sukmadinata, 2005). The data collection used only uses observation, interviews, documentation, and triangulation. Observation is done by systematically observing and recording the phenomena under investigation (Hadi, 1978). The author chose passive observation at Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa. That is, the author conducting data collection states frankly to the data source, that he is conducting research. The interviews conducted were unstructured interviews, which are free interviews where the author does not use interview guidelines that have been arranged systematically and completely to collect data. This is in accordance with the type of case study chosen by the author. In the interview process, the author used the WhatsApp application, email, and the help of a digital voice recorder to ensure that the process during the interview and the results can be stored properly, without having to worry about any forgotten and missed parts. Documentation conducted by the author is by looking for data about things or variables in the form of notes, transcripts, books, newspapers, magazines, and so on (Arikunto, 1992). The triangulation in this writing is a combination of several data collection techniques and existing data sources (Miles & Huberman, 1994), namely collecting data from observation, interviews, and documentation, while testing the credibility of the data.

This article takes a case study in a madrasa educational institution in Singapore to find an overview of the curriculum used. The madrasa chosen is one of the madrasas in the eastern region of Singapore, namely Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiyah which is located at 3 Lorong 39 Geylang Singapore 387865. In this article, the data sources used are documentation, books related to the curriculum and religious learning process at Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasah. In this case, the source of data related to religious studies is the curriculum guidebook.

Finally, the steps taken are broken down according to the stages of research preparation or pre-field, research implementation, and research analysis stages by going through several processes as follows. First, the Orientation Stage. In this stage, the researcher sought general information and read the results of previous research on curriculum issues and religious learning processes in Singapore's eastern madrasas. After that, the researcher continued with a pre-survey study.

Second, the Exploration Stage. This stage is intended to explore research data from the field. The steps taken are looking for data that is in accordance with the focus of the research, selecting reliable data sources, and documenting the data obtained in the field. In this exploration stage, researchers tried to get as much data as possible through observations, interviews, documentation studies, and other information related to the research focus. Researchers also made observations in the field and interviewed informants.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **A. Modernizing the Education Curriculum**

Modernization is a sociological approach that aims to understand the process of modernization and the variables that support the development of society. It describes how societies gradually move from a traditional, pre-modern stage of development to a modern, industrialized stage (Yadav, 2023). Modernization theory assumes that all societies follow the same developmental path (Perera, 2023). The theory suggests that traditional societies will develop as they adopt more modern practices, and that modern countries are richer and stronger, and their citizens are freer to enjoy higher standards of living (Wikipedia). Modernization theory looks at the internal factors of a country while assuming that with help, traditional countries can be brought to development in the same way as more developed countries have been. The most well-known version of modernization theory is Walt Rostow's Five Stages of Economic Growth, which suggests that after initial investment, countries will then begin an evolutionary process in which they will advance up the five stages of the development ladder (Kollmorgen, 2019). Modernization theory has been one of the main perspectives in the sociology of national development and underdevelopment since the 1950s.

From an educational point of view, modernization theory leads to educational innovation as an attempt to develop education or solve existing problems in education so that it can develop even better (Marzuki & Amin, 2022). Modernizing education, especially in the curriculum, involves developing values, culture, skills, and productivity through formal education. This requires changes in thinking about the delivery of education, learning, and the use of learning tools (Pasudev, 2010; Karmaker, 2019). A modern education system should also provide access to educational tools for thinking, developing knowledge, enabling the conversion of knowledge into wisdom, and distinguishing right from wrong. It should also lead to economic development with little difference between urban and rural areas, social ethical behavior, and the overall development of a country. In this regard, the curriculum has evolved

to include subjects such as computer science, information technology, entrepreneurship, and environmental studies. Modernization of educational programs is necessary to provide teachers with digital skills and competencies in curriculum selection (Jain, 2023). This Curriculum Reform has evolved into a movement of deep curriculum specialization and has given rise to various theories and practices, as is the case in China (Luo, 2023).

Some key aspects of education modernization and its implications for education. **First**, Access to Education. Modernization has led to increased access to education, especially in developing countries (Jain, 2023). This access allows more people to receive education and has helped reduce educational inequality. **Second**, Technology Integration. Modernizing education involves integrating technology into the classroom. This includes the use of computers, tablets and other digital devices to enhance the learning experience. The formation of digital competencies of future primary school teachers is also an important aspect of modernization (Melash, et al., 2020). **Third**, Curriculum Development. Modernizing education also involves developing a modern curriculum that is relevant to the needs of students in the 21st century. This includes the subjects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Wijaya, Sujimat & Nyoto, 2016). **Fourth**, Teacher Training. Modernizing education also involves training teachers to use modern teaching methods and technologies. This includes the use of online resources, multimedia tools and other digital technologies to enhance the learning experience (Jain, 2023). **Fifth**, Whole Personality Development. Education aims at the development of the whole personality in all its heights and dimensions. Modernization of education also focuses not only on academic development but also on the development of social, emotional, and physical skills (Bilal & Rehman, 2013).

## **B. The State of Madrasas in Singapore**

Madrasas in Singapore are divided into two. First, the Masjid Madrasa or also known as the Half-Time Madrasa. They are called Masjid Madrasas because the learning process is mostly done in the mosque and is not conducted throughout the day. They were established to provide *fardhu 'ain* education for Muslim children attending government schools that do not teach religion. Children who go to school in the morning can attend the madrasa in the afternoon and on weekends. Likewise, children who attend afternoon classes can take the madrasa in the morning and on weekends. Officially, this Half-Time Madrasa education is only provided up to the sixth grade. However, the Muslim community has demanded that this *fardhu 'ain* education continues up to the secondary school level in order to assist the critical teenage years. Several mosques and Islamic

educational institutions in Singapore then took the initiative to continue the Half-Time education up to the secondary level. The subjects taught in this Masjid Madrasa education are Tawheed, Fiqh, Akhlak, Sirah, Arabic, and recitation of the Qur'an (Syafri, Maya & Sarkiman, 2022).

Second, the Full-Time Madrasa. This education system is a system that implements a full education process for Singaporean muslim children. Generally, those who follow the full-time madrasa education no longer follow the education implemented by the Singapore government. They receive full certificates from the educational institutions that provide the education (Sun'an, Anwar & Rajab, 2023). There are six full-time Madrasas recognized in Singapore. Among them are Madrasah Al-Arabiah Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Irsyad Zuhri Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Aljunied Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Maarif Al-Islamiah, Madrasah Al-Sagoff Al-Arabiah, Madrasah Wak Tanjong Al-Islamiah. These six madrasas have similar characteristics, including being established before World War II or before Singapore's Independence; founded by individuals or families; functioned as a people's school that was established on the initiative of the people and managed by the people at the beginning of its establishment; used to be private and free. After AMLA was formed, these six madrasas came under the control of MUIS. However, in terms of management, they are still autonomous; their education starts from the first primary level; their education system starts from the *I'dadi* level (primary level) for 6 years and the *Thanawi* level (intermediate level) for 4 years; the concept of education is different from schools under the Singapore Ministry of Education; they do not have the same system, curriculum, syllabus, and textbooks; and joint examinations are only conducted at the *Thanawi* Four Level which are conducted and supervised by MUIS. The Full-Time Madrasas in Singapore have a general objective to address the shortcomings of the education system in government schools that do not have a religious element so that Singaporean Muslim children understand the knowledge of *faridhu 'Ain* and are able to practice it in their lives. While the specific purpose, especially for some madrasas, is to produce a class of *asatidz* and future scholars for the Singapore Islamic community (Sun'an, Anwar & Rajab, 2023).

Madrasas in Singapore saw a rise in popularity in the 1990s in line with the new public interest in Islam. Many Muslim families sent their children to Madrasas, especially Full-Time Madrasas. However, in December 1997, Singapore's Minister of Education presented the fact that about 1500 Singaporean children chose not to attend government schools. This amounted to 2%-3% of the number of Singaporean children who were supposed to enroll in primary one. Of these, 452 Muslim children enrolled in the Whole-Time Madrasah (Hj. Siren et al., 2014).

In light of the increasing enrollment of students into Madrasas, the Singapore Government began to raise concerns about madrasa students not fitting into the national schooling objectives espoused by the country. Specifically, questions were raised on a national platform as to whether madrasa students could effectively contribute to a knowledge-based economy, and participate in social integration as part of nation-building. Statistics revealed by Education Minister, Teo Chee Hean, show Malay-Muslim students in national schools perform much better than their counterparts in Madrasas. The data further revealed a high attrition rate of 65% among madrasa students. This is troubling, as madrasa students who drop out with only primary or secondary education find that they have neither the skills necessary to join the national workforce nor the qualifications required to become religious educators (Mokhtar, 2010).

With this concern, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong proposed a compulsory education policy in his 1999 National Labor Day Speech. This proposed policy included that children between the ages of six and 15 must attend six years of primary school education in national schools. The policy effectively implied that madrasas could no longer offer their primary classes as an alternative to the national primary school. It was also revealed that Madrasas have a high dropout rate and a weak educational foundation which could cause problems in the adaptation of madrasa graduates into the mainstream of Singapore's secularized society. This is troubling to the Singapore government, which sees this as a problem in terms of the economy and the availability of human resources, not to mention the social progress of the Malay community

For Singapore, human resources are an important asset. Because the government does not want to just let the resources of its people who cannot participate in the economic progress of the country. Moreover, Madrasas are considered not to provide their students in the economic field. This of course can cause the Malay community to lag behind other ethnic communities and cause social problems because of the wide gap.

In October 1999, Singapore's Prime Minister, En Goh Chok Tong, announced a plan to standardize education from primary to fourth grade for all schools, including Madrasas. This plan naturally caused unrest and disapproval within Singapore's Muslim community, as it would lead to the abolition of religious education and the closure of the Full-Time Madrasas. This is because in practice, Full-Time Madrasas cannot accept students from primary one. They can only accept students who advance to primary four, if they are willing to leave government schools (Sun'an, 2016).

The proposal for a compulsory education policy received mixed but intense responses from various sections of the Malay-Muslim community. On the one hand, there were those who recognized the shortcomings of the madrasah system and supported the policy. On the other hand, however, madrasa advocates became agitated and vehemently opposed the policy which they perceived as a government ploy to undermine the Muslim school system. The madrasa advocates' opposition was based on the premise that the majority of Muslims were keen to preserve the institution of Madrasas. Thus, there were various reactions from the Singapore Muslim community, especially in the dialog events organized by MUIS and the government. Although educational practitioners in the Muslim community share a common view on the importance of Madrasas, they have different approaches to maintaining the institution.

Some argue that the government's initiative is good and will encourage madrasas to make changes according to the needs of their surroundings to become more relevant, especially to support the country's economy. They argued that madrasa graduates are not equipped with the skills to anticipate contemporary issues. Madrasas are also not open to the general public, and their interactions and interests are limited to the Singapore Islamic community. Others argue that the compulsory education plan is the government's reaction to the increased awareness of Islam among Singapore's Muslim community. They believe that the government was not given a proper overview of the concept of madrasa education whose graduates are considered to be excluded from the national mainstream. Their concern is that the compulsory education plan will result in the long-term closure of Madrasas, as was the case with Malay schools in the past (Mokhtar, 2010).

After much deliberation, MUIS and the Malay Muslim community agreed to propose an agreement, namely that the Muslim community supports compulsory education and providing knowledge for Singaporean children in the face of a knowledge-based economy, providing an educational experience to foster national identity and social cohesion. This can still be achieved without implementing compulsory education. However, the Muslim community does not want compulsory education to weaken the madrasa institution or cause it to disappear in the future.

After a series of closed-door meetings and open forums, PM Goh then announced that madrasas can be exempted from compulsory education on the condition that they prepare their primary school students for the national exam, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Madrasa students must meet the benchmark set by Malay students in the six lowest-performing national

schools in the PSLE at least twice in a three-year period. Failure to meet this benchmark will mean that a particular madrasa will not be allowed to offer primary classes for one year. New admissions of students to Madrasas will be limited to 400 students per year.

PM Goh further emphasized that the policy was not intended to close Madrasas, and the Government's willingness to support one madrasa from primary to secondary level was a testament to its recognition of their importance. This policy was later honored when the Government upgraded Madrasah Al-Irsyad with the necessary funding and infrastructure support. The enactment of the Compulsory Education Act in 2001, and its eventual implementation in 2003, prompted madrasas to prepare a pioneer cohort of madrasa student seats for their Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) in 2008 to meet the benchmark, lest the authorities stop primary school enrollment for those madrasas. To this end, the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) requirement has been described as a key driver of change for Singapore madrasas in the 21st century. In this case, all madrasa students must sit the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which is a kind of primary school-level GED exam controlled by Singapore's Ministry of Education. Therefore, the Muslim community needs to determine the pass rate of madrasa students in the PSLE. For Madrasas that fail to achieve the minimum pass rate set, they risk closure.

For Full-Time Madrasas, fulfilling compulsory education as prescribed by the government is a challenge in itself given the less favorable circumstances in terms of resources and capabilities. Moreover, to ensure that madrasa students pass the PSLE in addition to mastering religious subjects. To address this, the Madrasa undertook a comprehensive reform of the curriculum and the necessary preparation by equipping students with enhanced competencies in English, Mathematics and Science. Such measures include greater emphasis on English as the language of instruction, and the introduction of learning support programs to help weaker students.

Today, fulltime madrasas focus on three main aspects of Islamic education in their curriculum, namely Religious learning materials and General Academic Areas which include the fields of study of languages (English, Malay, and Arabic), Islamic theology (Tauhid), Islamic jurisprudence (*Fikih*), Islamic *adab* (*akhlaq*), prophetic tradition (Hadith), Islamic history (Sirah) and Islamic scripture (al-Qur'an), mathematics and science; Mastery of Life Skills as part of students' cognitive development for their lives and responsibilities; and Character and Spiritual Development through Madrasa culture, exemplary teachers and peers in daily interactions, congregational worship activities and

collective learning inside and outside the classroom. For academic subjects, the Madrasa only offers standard level subjects in primary school. For students who need academic learning at a later level, they are encouraged to consider transferring to a national school where they will be better supported. This also applies to those who need learning support due to learning disabilities or other special needs (MUIS, 2023).

At the Intermediate level, Madrasas offer only a few academic subjects. Those students who qualify for the regular academic track may still be accepted to continue their learning at the Junior High School on a case-by-case basis. However, for admitted students, the Madrasa will cater to individual needs and offer differentiated learning according to the student's needs and ability level. For students who need additional support, assistance will be provided through small group learning sessions to help them keep up with the standard learning pace. For higher ability students, they will also be given the opportunity to be challenged through participation in programs that will help maximize their potential.

### **C. Curriculum Modernization at Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa Singapore**

Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah is one of six national madrasas recognized by the Singapore government, which only accepts female students. Founded by Sheikh Muhammad Fadzlullah Suhaimi in 1936, it was named after the same madrasa he had founded in Wonosobo, Central Java, Indonesia (Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah, 2017). Sheikh Fadzlullah studied at Al-Azhar University in 1912. She was one of the activists for women's freedom in getting the same education as men (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005). The initiative to establish Madrasa Al-Ma'rif was one of her brave steps that she took with the approval of her family in her efforts to improve Islamic religious knowledge among Malay Muslim families at that time. This was because the Madrasa was established at a time when the local community did not value or feel the need to provide Islamic religious education to girls. Sheikh Fadzlullah realized a madrasa that offered systematic religious instruction for female students in Singapore.

At the beginning of its establishment, Madrasah Al-Ma'rif in Tanjong Katong Road had 60 male and female students at the *ibtida'i* (primary grade) level. The teaching was conducted using three languages: Malay, English and Arabic. As a Madrasa that accepted female students, the move was considered radical. After a few years, the number of female students who wanted to study at the Madrasa increased. This was directly proportional to the number of male students who were decreasing in number. Finally, in 1969 the management of Madrasah Al-Ma'rif decided to no longer accept male students. This change reflected that many

Malay Muslim families began to realize the importance of religious knowledge for their daughters (Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah, 2017).

Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa has a vision to be a dynamic school of choice. In this regard, it is a safe, nurturing, yet vibrant environment built on positive relationships and collective efforts between teachers, students and parents. Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah considers each learner to be unique, a Muslimah leader, and has the potential to strive for the highest educational outcomes they are capable of achieving. The mission of Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah is to nurture and develop future Muslimah leaders who are spiritual, intellectually progressive, and embrace community connectedness. While the values developed in the Madrasa are respect, adaptability, resilience, and empathy (<https://almaarif.edu.sg/>).

In 2006, Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah moved to 3 Lorong 39 Geylang. In this new place, Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah has expanded to include primary to pre-university levels. With a larger building, Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah conducted the learning process from 7.30am to 3pm, with some additional class hours for each subject. The madrasa also attempted to reform by incorporating non-religious subjects into the curriculum. Most importantly, the emergence of this new generation of madrasas marked a departure in the structural organization and intellectual tradition introduced by the Islamic reformers. The structure of these madrasas was generally characterized by their systematic organization, such as a fixed curriculum period, the division of primary and secondary education levels, and the presence of facilities such as chairs and desks for students. As for the enhancement of intellectual traditions, madrasas include other 'non-religious' subjects, such as mathematics and science (and other subjects depending on the madrasa) in addition to Islamic subjects. This was especially true in the post-World War II (WWII) period (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005).

The curriculum of Madrasah Al-Ma'rif is under the supervision and validation of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). In the 1960s, *Ustadzah* Sa'adah Binte Mohd. Fadhlullah Suhaimi rearranged the curriculum at Madrasah Al-Ma'rif so that it could be aligned with the national curriculum so that graduates could continue their education to overseas educational institutions such as Kolej Islam in Kelantan, Universiti Malaya in Malaysia, as well as Universiti Nasional in Singapore and to Al-Azhar University, Egypt. To this end, subjects at the secondary level were developed, mainly in the subjects of General Science, Natural Science and History to prepare students for the GCE 'O' examinations in 1971, and two years later those who successfully passed

continued at the Pre-U level (2 years) and took the GCE 'A' examinations. To this end, the madrasa curriculum was again supplemented and changed (Aljunied & Hussin, 2005).

The Cambridge General Certificate of Education (GCE) is an international examination held annually and conducted jointly by the University of Cambridge Syndicate Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), where the University of Cambridge is the originator of the Cambridge curriculum system. In Singapore, this exam is conducted to equalize the quality of graduating students in the country. GCE 'O' is a basic or general level certification exam taken by final year students. While GCE 'A' is an advanced level certification exam that is taken as a requirement for continuing education at university. GCE 'O' and GCE 'A' certifications are imposed on madrasa students to equalize the qualifications of madrasa graduates with those of national schools. This eligibility allows them to enter universities such as NUS, UIAM, or other overseas universities.

Since its establishment in 1936, Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah has used an academic subject curriculum model with a separated subject curriculum approach. This curriculum model emphasizes more on the material aspect or subject matter, in the form of separate subjects from one another (Sania et al., 2021). This model has not changed until now. The only changes that have occurred are in the learning model and curriculum materials. These changes were made to keep up with the development of education and the interests of the country. Currently, the curriculum changes made by Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa include secular sciences material while strengthening the learning of *ukhrawi* sciences so that the learning system is equivalent to national school education.

In 2003 Singapore's Compulsory Education System (CE) came into effect. All fulltime madrasa students who are about to graduate are required to take either the National Examination or the Primary Leaving Examination (PSLE), which must meet benchmarks set by the Singapore Ministry of Education. If a Madrasa fails two consecutive years within a three-year period, it will not be allowed to take the first primary level students in the following year. The benchmark is determined by the average score achieved by Malay students from the bottom six national schools in the PSLE examination in the same year.

Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa, apart from being one of the fulltime Madrasas, also serves as a morning halftime Madrasa for students who attend national schools during the day. They study at Madrasah Al-Ma'rif from 8-11am. The content of the religious curriculum, both for fulltime and halftime madrasas,

includes *fiqih*, painting, khat writing, Arabic, Tawhid, Hadith, Malay, English and Mathematics.

Tabel 1. Primary Level Curriculum of Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa Singapura

Primary Level Curriculum Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Singapura		
<b>Primary 1 &amp; 2</b>	Core Subjects: English Language Malay Language Arabic Language Mathematics	Non-Examination Subjects: Islamic Religious Knowledge Al-Qur'an Islamic Social Studies Information Technology
<b>Primary 3 &amp; 4</b>	Core Subjects: English Language Malay Language Arabic Language Mathematics Science	Non-Examination Subjects: Islamic Religious Knowledge Al-Qur'an Islamic Social Studies Information Technology
<b>Primary 5 &amp; 6</b>	PSLE Subjects: English language Malay Language Mathematics Science	Madrasa Examination Subjects: Islamic Religious Knowledge Al-Qur'an Islamic Social Studies Information Technology

The table above shows the changes in the Madrasa curriculum at the primary level. This was influenced by the Compulsory Education Policy in 2003 which resulted in students at Primary 6 having to sit the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) with a set Average Benchmark. English is the main language of instruction in some subjects.

Tabel 2. Secondary Level Curriculum of Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa Singapura

Secondary Level Curriculum Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Singapura		
<b>Secondary 1 &amp; 2</b>	Academic Subjects: English Language Malay Language Arabic Language E. Mathematics Geography History Science	<i>Ukhrawy</i> Subjects: Tauhid Fikih Tafsir Hadis Islamic History Al-Qur'an
<b>Secondary 3 &amp; 4</b>	GCE 'O' Level Subjects: English Language Malay Language Arabic Language E. Mathematics A. Mathematics	<i>Syhadah</i> Subjects: Tauhid Fikih Tafsir Hadis Islamic History

Humanities (Geography)	Al-Qur'an
Pure Science	Arabic Language
Combined Science	Malay Language
Islamic Religious Knowledge	English Language
Malay Literature	

From the table above, it can be seen that the religious curriculum specifically begins to be given at the secondary level, known as *ukhrawi* subjects. The *ukhrawi* subjects are Tawheed, Jurisprudence, Hadith, Sirah, and the Qur'an. The textbooks used for learning religious materials have been determined by the Madrasa, starting from the first intermediate level to the fourth intermediate level. The Madrasa library also provides books that can be used by students, especially for those in the third and fourth intermediate levels to be used as reference material in doing assignments or for reading material to complement existing textbooks. Currently, students at the Madrasa are also provided with links to internet resources designated by the Madrasa and videos created by the teachers to supplement the material.

At this secondary level, there were also changes to the curriculum to meet eligibility requirements with the addition of several subjects such as Additional Mathematics, Combined Science (Physics Chemistry/Biology Chemistry), Pure Biology, and Malay Literature. This meant that madrasa students could not focus on the *fardhu 'ain* sciences due to the heavy and diverse subject load.

In 2005, Madrasah Al-Ma'rif paved the way for the ease of Pre-U Azhar students (*Ukhrawi* department) to continue their education to Al-Azhar University, Egypt, by signing an agreement (MoU) between Al-Azhar University and Madrasah Al-Ma'rif. For this reason, in 2013 Madrasah Al-Ma'rif developed a special syllabus for intermediate level students who will participate in the program.

Tabel 3. Intermediate Level Curriculum of Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa Singapura

Pre-U Level Curriculum Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Singapura	
Pre-U 1 & 2: GCE 'A' Level	'A' Level Subjects: Islamic Law Islamic Theology
	H1 Subjects: General Paper Mathematics Malay
	H2 Subjects: Malay Literature
	'AO' Level Subjects:

	Arabic Language
<b>Syahadah Aliyah Pre-U 1 &amp; 2: Al-Azhar</b>	<i>Ushuluddin</i> Subjects: Tauhid Mantiq Tafsir Ulum Al-Qur'an Hadis Musthalah Hadis
	Lughah Subjects: Adab & Nusuz Arud & Qafiah Balaghah Insya' & Mutala'ah Nahwu & Sharaf
	Syariah Subjects: Faraid Fiqh Ushul Fiqh Tarikh Tasyri' T. Islam Qawa'id Fiqh
	Core Subjects: Qur'an English Language Malay Language

The religious curriculum at Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa is a collection of ukhrawi subjects that teach classical religious sciences. Therefore, the methods used in the learning process in the Madrasa are not much different from those in Singapore. Before the pandemic, the methods used still used conventional methods that used teacher-centered in the classroom. Changes began to emerge during the pandemic where there was a Home-Based Learning policy that required students to study at home and the learning process involved digital technology. From the results of observations made for some time, both in online and offline learning, the author found that the teaching methods commonly used by teachers in teaching Tawhid, Jurisprudence, Hadith, and Tafsir materials are a combination of the lecture method, question and answer method, and demonstration method. Before the pandemic, the lecture teaching method was still the leading method in the teaching process of Tawheed, Jurisprudence, Hadith, and Tafsir at Madrasah Al-Ma'rif. This method was then modified or adjusted to combine (combination) with the question-and-answer method, discussion method, and occasionally the demonstration method.

But during the pandemic and its aftermath, the lecture method has only become a supplement to the teaching of these religious materials. Teachers are no longer teacher-centered as the teaching process focuses more on technology-based media and tools, such as videos, websites, and so on. The existing methods are now carried out using learning tools that can replace the teacher's function. It can be said that the lecture method, question and answer method, discussion method, and demonstration method are still used, only experiencing innovation and development according to the times.

From its early history, Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah already has a standardized religious curriculum that has been implemented since its inception. Tawhid, Jurisprudence, Tafsir and Hadith are the *ukhrawi* subjects that students must choose. As *Fardhu 'ain sciences*, these four materials receive an equal portion in the time allocation and selected materials taught. However, as the situation and conditions in Singapore evolved, the standardized curriculum changed in accordance with the policy direction of the Singapore government. The standardization of education issued by the Singapore government requires that these materials be reduced in learning hours for policies controlled by the Ministry of Education. These policies certainly make Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah make improvements into and out of the Madrasa. In this case, there are several factors that support and hinder the Madrasa in implementing modernization of the religious curriculum.

1. Internal Madrasa Factors. This internal factor comes from the environment within the Madrasa. This factor greatly influences the success of curriculum implementation in madrasas after the Singapore government policy related to education standardization. Some of these factors include:
  - a. Madrasa Facilities and Infrastructure. Educational facilities are all devices, materials, and tools that are directly used in the educational process in madrasas. Meanwhile, educational infrastructure is all basic equipment that indirectly supports the implementation of the Madrasa education process. Examples of educational facilities are markers, paper, chairs, tables, computers, and so on. The educational infrastructure includes classrooms, library rooms, laboratory rooms, toilets, canteens, sports fields, Wi-Fi, and so on.

From the results of observations, documentation, and interviews, it was found that the facilities and infrastructure of Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah have met the standards for the fulfillment of the teaching process in both madrasas. Starting from the need for learning resources in libraries, laboratories, to the provision of internet networks as learning centers during the pandemic. However, there is one inhibiting factor related to facilities and

infrastructure in these two madrasas, namely the absence of a religious laboratory so that teachers cannot practice according to what is desired, only capitalizing on existing infrastructure.

- b. Educators or Madrasa Teachers. Teachers have the main task of educating, teaching, guiding, directing, training, assessing, and evaluating students in the teaching process. In Singapore madrasas, teachers are known as *asatidz*. These *asatidz* spearhead the process of teaching religious materials. From the results of interviews conducted with several *asatidz* in Madrasah Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah, the main inhibiting factor in the implementation of the religious curriculum after the implementation of the Madrasa national exam obligation is the reduced lesson time for each *ukhrawi* subject which includes Tawheed, Fikih, Tafsir, and Hadith. The current madrasa curriculum requires students to study secular (general) subjects so that the time for each religious subject is only 30-35 minutes each to teach each period. There are four periods in a week, which is very difficult for the students as there are many topics, some of which are not taught. Although students are now learning using the internet, which allows lessons to be accessed at home, it does not guarantee that students can keep up with the lessons, given that they also get the same load from each subject that they get at the Madrasa.
  - c. Madrasa Students. Students are the main thing that must be considered in making policies related to the Madrasa curriculum. The success of the policy can be achieved if students are able to accept changes in the Madrasa curriculum related to the national exam policy that requires them to study secular (general) sciences. In this case, the students at Al-Ma'rif Al-Islamiah Madrasa are the most important element related to the Singapore government policy.
2. External Madrasa Factors. External factors that support and inhibit the implementation of religious curriculum policies come from outside the Madrasa environment, namely family, neighborhood, school, and community. In this case, the thing that most influences the implementation of the religious curriculum is coming from schools and communities. Because the implementation of this religious curriculum is carried out because of the community's need for the quality of Madrasa graduates who are expected to be able to go directly to Singapore society. This must be adjusted to the Republic of Singapore Act which states that education in Singapore has two objectives, namely fostering the attitude of students and preparing them to become good citizens and willing to work.

## Conclusion

Modernization in education is necessary to improve the nation's productivity in the mastery and application of science, education, and technology. In Singapore, it can be said that the process of modernization in Singapore Madrasas began with the Compulsory Education Policy which resulted in students at the 6th grade level having to graduate with a standard score in accordance with the Average Benchmark set by the Singapore Ministry of Education. With this policy, Singapore Madrasas, whose original purpose was only to teach religious sciences to produce religious teachers, added science, mathematics, and English as compulsory materials that must also be mastered by madrasa students. This makes the curriculum in Singapore madrasas undergo changes to adjust to Singapore's national education policy, especially changes to the learning system and curriculum materials. However, as a representation of Islamic education, madrasas in Singapore still maintain *ukhrawi* (religious) materials as the main curriculum material. This freedom to develop curriculum materials is given by the Singapore Islamic Religious Council as the person in charge of Islamic Education for Malay Muslims, which is adjusted to the vision and mission of the Madrasa.

The modernization of Madrasas in Singapore involves developing a modern curriculum that is relevant to the needs of students in the 21st century. It is quite understandable that what the Singapore government is doing through the Singapore Ministry of Education is part of the grand design of national education goals. Madrasas are part of the education system that produces human resources that are important assets for the country. Madrasa graduates must be able to collaborate with national school graduates to build their country. In this case, the standardization set by the Ministry of Education can be said to be the main driver in the change of Madrasas in Singapore.

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