Factors Influencing the Decision of an Islamic Boarding School to Choose Face-to-Face Learning During Pandemic

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Abstract

This study highlights the factors influencing face-to-face learning decision-making by an Islamic boarding school during the pandemic. This qualitative descriptive-analytic study was conducted at MA Miftahunnajah, Sleman. Interviews, documentation, and observations were used to collect data. The research revealed that the following factors influenced face-to-face learning decisions: 1) internal conditions, such as boarding school security, student order, parental involvement, geographic location, and curriculum structure; 2) information availability; 3) external conditions, including community
involvement and collaboration with other schools; 4) personality and skills of decision-makers. In addition, the Islamic boarding school’s security was the most influential factor in all these factors, so facilitating schools with dormitories or boarding schools as places for students to live and study is a more appropriate solution than forcing online learning.

**Keywords:** Face-to-face learning; decision-making; Islamic boarding school

A. Introduction

On December 1, 2019, the 2019 coronavirus (COVID-19) was discovered in Wuhan, China. Up to this point, people worldwide have been significantly affected by a pandemic, which became the fifth pandemic following the 1918 influenza pandemic (Liu et al., 2020, p. 77). Since President Joko Widodo announced the first case of COVID-19 on March 2, 2020, Indonesia has become one of the countries affected by a coronavirus (Kemenkes, 2020). The Indonesian government has also said they will try to prevent coronavirus transmission. In the education sector, numerous policies have then been implemented to address the coronavirus’s impact (Wajdi et al., 2020, p. 101). Online classes displace traditional and routine learning emphasizing teacher-student interaction inside and outside the classroom (Abidah et al., 2020, pp. 47–48). In this case, online education refers to online learning that uses various information technologies, such as WhatsApp, Google Classroom, Zoom Meeting, and other applications.

Regrettably, online learning has a bearing on student learning performance. Cahyani, Listiana, and Larasati (2020, p. 138) demonstrated in their research involving 344 senior high school/vocational high school/Islamic senior high school students in their analysis that students’ motivation to learn dropped significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic’s online learning period. The results are also identical at the other levels. Utami and Jaya’s (2021, p. 239) research also uncovered that the learning motivation level at the elementary school level was insufficient and should be immediately increased.

Additionally, Winata’s (2021, p. 13) research clearly illustrated that students’ concentration levels were low when they were engaged in online learning. Even further, this shift in learning patterns from face-to-face to online education, also known as online learning, may result in students losing interest or dropping out due to decreased interaction with teachers during the learning process. Online learning issues also arise due to a widening gap in the quality of educational services. Muhajir’s (2020, p. 220) research has revealed a significant digital divide in society. With this digital divide, distance education cannot be considered suitable schooling but a case of emergency schooling.
Still, online learning is critical due to the complexity of circumstances and regulations during a pandemic (Aagaard & Earnest, 2021, p. 183). During the pandemic, the authors discovered that several schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY) Province chose to conduct all face-to-face instruction. Amid the pandemic in Indonesia, on May 31, 2021, the authors interviewed one of the principals in DIY, who cannot be named, showing that the school has been conducting face-to-face learning. The authors also made observations between June and August 2021, directly and through the media. It was revealed that at least 20 schools did all face-to-face learning during the pandemic. In addition, according to interviews with the head of the principal group, M. Yusuf, schools have been permitted to conduct limited face-to-face learning in October 2021.

Specifically, Islamic boarding schools are the most likely to have a face-to-face policy. The Islamic boarding schools in this discussion are those owned by boarding schools. In addition, the Islamic boarding schools are where all or a portion of the students live in the dorm (Syafe'i, 2017, p. 99). In this case, Islamic boarding school education can stay the same in the future because of its characteristics. It can also give more chances to meet society's needs, such as having formal educational institutions (Mansur, 2013, p. 45). It is revealed that there are 319 Islamic boarding schools in DIY, 170 of which offer education, including formal schooling. This data is based on the Islamic Boarding School Database of the Ministry of Religion (2022).

On the other hand, decision-making is when individuals, groups, or organizations reach conclusions about what future actions should be pursued given a set of objectives and constraints on available resources (Schoemaker & Russo, 2015, p. 1). A variety of factors can influence decisions. According to Dietrich (2012), factors influencing decisions include previous experiences, personality, cognitive biases, beliefs in personal values, and commitment. Meanwhile, according to Syamsi (2007, p. 23), four factors are more likely to lead to organizational decision-making. These factors are 1) the organization's internal state, 2) the availability of information, 3) the external conditions/environment, and 4) the personality and skills of decision-makers.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that various factors influence school decision-making during a pandemic. Aziz (2022, p. 135) explained in his research that during a pandemic, school principals' decisions were influenced more by the quality of information about COVID-19 than by parental involvement. The study recommends that future research examine decision-making in Islamic boarding schools in greater detail, as they scored differently on questionnaires than other types of schools, particularly regarding face-to-face
learning decisions. Similarly, Nurhidayati’s (2015, p. 1169) research found no evidence of schools’ decision-making regarding face-to-face learning. Nurhidayati’s research focused on the impact of organizational culture and self-concept on principals’ decision-making regarding school quality improvement. However, no other studies examine how schools make decisions about face-to-face learning. Thus, the researchers hope to elucidate the factors influencing Islamic boarding schools’ face-to-face learning decisions by reviewing these critical recommendations.

This study is part of a qualitative study using a descriptive-analytical method. The natural characteristic of this method was chosen. After all, the analysis was conducted in the field and was interpretive (Sugiyono, 2019, pp. 16–17). The study took place at Madrasah Aliyah Miftahunnajah, Sleman, which is in the hamlet of Wonorejo, RT 01/RW 18, Sardonoharjo, Ngaglik, Sleman, Special Region of Yogyakarta Province. This school was selected not only because it has provided complete face-to-face learning since the pandemic began but also because it is open to research. On the other hand, other schools are relatively closed for research, according to the authors’ observations in December 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Islamic boarding schools.

This study used structured interviews, documentation, and observation as data collection techniques. Then, the researchers carried out triangulation tests to ensure the collected data’s validity and reliability by interviewing four representatives from different points of view: Mr. Muslih Bahaddur, S.Pd., the principal of Madrasah Aliyah Miftahunnajah, Mr. Riyadi Hidayat, S.Hut., secretary of the Yogyakarta Pelita Ummah Foundation, who oversees MA Miftahunnajah, Mr. Suparyanto, M.Eng., as the parents’ representatives, and Mr. Suparno, as the head chairman of the madrasa committee, representative of the surrounding community, and the head of neighborhood in Wonorejo Hamlet.

B. Discussion

A decision is a conclusion between two or more alternatives (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2015). Decision-making, as Moorhead and Griffin (2014) argued, is a process of choosing among these alternatives. Information, objectives, action selection, potential choices, auction results, and values are associated with one of the action options and outcome goals. Individually and collectively, the definition is broad. Simultaneously, this research focused on organizational decision-making, as Schoemaker & Russo (2015, p. 1) describe it, particularly in Islamic boarding school-based educational institutions.
Several theories, such as Dietrich's (2012) view, have discussed factors influencing decision-making but focused more on personal decision-making. According to Donelan et al. (2015), data quality, decision-making time, and decision awareness are all factors affecting the quality of decision-making. In addition, Elbanna et al. (2014) mentioned three factors hypothesized to impact decision-making: trust, participation, and past performance. In this case, the researchers prefer Syamsi's (2007, p. 23) theory to analyze and describe organizational factors rather than individual factors. It covers 1) the internal state of the organization, such as available funds, employee capabilities, completeness of equipment, organizational structure, and others; 2) the availability of information; 3) external conditions/environment, such as economic, social, political, legal, cultural, and others and 4) the personality and skills of decision-makers, such as assessment, needs, intelligence level, capacity, capability, and others.

Particularly, Madrasah Aliyah Miftahunnajah Sleman has been designated as the research subject. The previous explanation stated that schools had been closed long enough for full face-to-face learning decisions to be investigated since the pandemic began. On the other hand, MA Miftahunnajah accepted the research. Since MA Miftahunnajah is a formal school with a boarding school as a dormitory, it stands out from other schools. In addition, all students are accommodated in boarding schools.

In mid-December 2009, Miftahunnajah Islamic Boarding School (M-IBS) was established. This school has an Islamic senior high school (MA) program, which has a management philosophy integrating Islamic values with science (intellectuals) and skills, intending to produce students with a straight, independent Aqedah, and productive in their respective circumstances (potential/talent/tendency) (Miftahunnajah, 2021). The vision is realized through developing a Quranic generation that excels in science and technology and is environmentally conscious. Meanwhile, its missions are to 1) provide comprehensive educational programs in qolbiyah, aqliyah, and jasadiyah to aid in improving the quality of Quranic individuals, 2) develop active learning, deep thinking, and problem-solving skills through the use of comprehensive, up-to-date, and globally-minded educational tools in the context of fostering potential interests in the fields of knowledge and technology, and 3) establish an educational climate and environment that actively promotes individual quality improvement (Miftahunnajah, 2021). According to researchers' observations, in the even semester of 2022, MA Miftahunnajah students totaled between 37 and 74 students.

After conducting research, documentation studies, interviews, and in-depth observations uncovered that MA Miftahunnajah students had done face-to-face learning since
the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. According to the principal, all students’ position in the Islamic boarding school has been orderly. Despite the obstacles at the start of the adjustment, everything could be organized to run generally with a few changes.

This face-to-face decision was made through thoughtful consideration; even at the time, the review was held frequently, not just once, to observe the dynamics of COVID-19 development. According to the principal, the school required input and consideration from various parties. Foundations, madrasahs/Islamic boarding schools, committees, the surrounding community, and parents were all involved in the discussion.

The following factors were shown to influence face-to-face learning decisions in the Islamic boarding schools, as determined by studies at MA Miftahunnajah Sleman:

1. Organizational Internal Conditions

The internal conditions of the organization encompass a wide range of factors. Several internal organizational conditions influenced MA Miftahunnajah’s decision to conduct face-to-face learning, including 1) Islamic boarding school security, 2) student order, 3) parental involvement, 4) geographical conditions, and 6) curriculum structure.

a. Islamic boarding school security

Face-to-face learning was risky, but the principal claimed it was made precisely because the Islamic boarding school conditions have already been safe. This decision was considered a better option than sending the student home. The efforts to prevent the pandemic ensured that all parties entering and leaving the Islamic boarding school had been screened. The school principal gave an example of a general subject teacher who lived outside the Islamic boarding school and implemented the COVID-19 health protocol.

In addition, children were, in fact, safer in the Islamic boarding school than at home, according to parent representatives. At home, children could not be restrained, according to him. "Children are still difficult if they do not go out with their friends,” he said. Related to that, Poulain et al. (2021, p. 1) found that the number of children playing outside increased significantly. It was because time spent at school was replaced by time spent studying at home, allowing more time to be spent playing. This study revealed that the Islamic boarding school conditions were better maintained since children were only active within the Islamic boarding school environment. This Islamic boarding school also had a rule, which was strictly enforced to ensure that children became accustomed to only Islamic boarding school-related activities (Azizah, 2019, p. 437; Habibi & Supriatno, 2020, p. 342). In other words, the COVID-19 virus was less dangerous to children in this condition than at home.
b. Student order

In this study, the student order was associated with health protocol adherence. According to the principal, it was due to the senior high school level.

"We are at the Madrasah Aliyah (MA/senior high school) level, where the average age is at least 15 to 18 years, and they are considered adults, so they are easy to direct, especially when it comes to following orders and directions. For example, we require students to wear masks when visiting teachers outside the madrasah; now, this MA-aged child can easily follow instructions."

According to Li's (2021, p. 74) research, students with higher self-control and self-control had better self-control than those with lower levels. As a result, MA Miftahunnajah preferred face-to-face instruction.

c. Parental involvement

In this research, parental involvement was the third-factor influencing internal conditions. Even though the institution made the decision, the school still sought most parents' input because it valued deliberation. The opinions of these parents were gathered by creating and distributing a questionnaire to them. The results revealed that most parents wanted their children to remain in the Islamic boarding school since they were concerned that they would lose their Qur’an memorization. Also, it was not easy to keep track of both studying and extracurricular activities when students were at home. It aligns with Aziz's (2022, p. 235) research, which found that parental involvement impacted school decisions.

d. Geographical condition

In this case, the madrasa's geographical location influenced face-to-face learning decisions. MA Miftahunnajah Sleman was isolated from outsiders due to its rural location, surrounded by rice fields and gardens. This condition ensured that the COVID-19 pandemic did not jeopardize activities. It is consistent with Huang et al.'s (2021, p. 1) research, which stated that rural areas were significantly less affected by COVID-19 than urban areas.

e. Curriculum structure

MA Miftahunnajah was built on an Islamic boarding school foundation and has been primarily composed of Qur’anic memorization (tahfidz). This curriculum necessitates tahfidz learning to achieve the target as efficiently as possible through face-to-face sorogan or memorization deposit. Thus, it resulted in the ineffectiveness of tahfidz from home during the pandemic. Additionally, parents stated that they struggled to accompany tahfidz while learning at home. It is consistent with Imanah et al.'s (2021, p. 93) findings, which found that students had difficulty memorizing the Qur’an and experienced a decline in memorization achievement.
while studying at home during a pandemic for a variety of reasons, one of which was that their parents could not assist them.

2. Information Availability

In this study, information accessibility was critical because, according to the principal, social media was highly beneficial to quickly obtaining data. During the pandemic, fast and accurate information is vital for making decisions about face-to-face learning. In this regard, face-to-face learning required knowledge of COVID-19 security and institution management during the pandemic. It is consistent with Supriadi, Usman, and Jabar’s (2021, p. 43) findings, demonstrating that information moderated by information systems could influence principals’ decision-making.

3. Organizational External Conditions

a. Community Involvement

In this study, community involvement was the first external factor determining MA Miftahunnajah’s face-to-face learning decisions. In this case, schools gained funding to keep providing face-to-face instruction in the Islamic boarding school. One factor examined is that the Islamic boarding school’s position was safe since it had no direct touch with the general population and was surrounded by rice fields, thereby isolating it. According to community members, substantial contact between the school and the neighborhood made it simpler to respond swiftly to issues. The message was also communicated in the local community meeting forum.

"Once, at the neighborhood association meeting, the Islamic boarding school policy on student retention was conveyed and requested consideration from the residents. Naturally, it was a good thing to convey in public. Therefore, it made no difference if it was our unilateral choice as a neighborhood association. Thank God, the neighborhood association residents were unanimous in their support; no one objected if the students continued to study in the Islamic boarding school."

Some further stated that they supported the initiative since they found it difficult to accompany their children as they studied online at home. Related to this, several studies have revealed the same conclusion that community support in implementing educational institutions was required (Mas, 2011, p. 271; Pakniany et al., 2020, p. 184).
b. Cooperation with other Islamic boarding schools

The school also cooperated with other Islamic boarding schools, both within the Special Region of Yogyakarta Province and beyond, to seek information to discuss the efforts being made, mainly about policies to respond to the dynamics of this disease. It implied that data from outside the Islamic boarding school was also considered while making judgments. It corroborates with Dietrich's (2012, p. 1) study, arguing that relevance affected decision making, specifically if the view of one school was consistent with the thought of numerous schools. It predicts that schools’ reluctance only to implement face-to-face learning is reasonable.

4. The Personality and Skills of the Decision-Makers

In this study, since relatively young people operated the school, their personalities and abilities appeared beneficial. It encouraged schools to take risks during the pandemic. "Thank God, our team at MA Miftahunnajah Sleman is still young, enthusiastic, and 'literate' towards information and technology, so this makes it easier." As the response of the principal regarding whether the personality and ability of decision-makers influenced the policies in this school, the foundation's secretary answered, "Yes, it does influence". It is in accordance with Syamsi's (2007) theory suggesting that personality and decision-making abilities are a factor in decision-making. In the case of MA Miftahunnajah, face-to-face learning decisions would not be carried out if the decision-maker did not have enough confidence to take risky decisions during the pandemic.

The researchers then assessed which factor was the most influential out of all of these. Based on interviews with resource individuals, observations, and documentation, the most critical component was the Islamic boarding school security. It was also backed by the researchers' study, identifying other elements that existed due to or were dependent on the Islamic boarding school security. In this case, the student order factor would vanish if the Islamic boarding school was unsafe; students would request to return home if the Islamic boarding school was unsafe. Parents who supported the Islamic boarding school would also not be involved if they were concerned about their condition; instead, they would advise their children to study at home. In addition, the community's support for the Islamic boarding school would also be ceased to exist if it posed a hazard to the community and the Islamic boarding school occupants, who were particularly aware of this danger due to their everyday lives being so near to the Islamic boarding school's location.
Moreover, it aligns with the informant’s assertion that the primary reason was the Islamic boarding school’s security. It is also consistent with what researchers discovered in the Special Region of Yogyakarta Province that Islamic boarding schools outnumbered general schools that offered face-to-face instruction. Generally, schools avoided face-to-face instruction since they had no dorms where students might be sheltered from COVID-19 during instructional activities. Apart from the Islamic boarding school’s security, several things were considered, including geographical circumstances, curriculum structure, information, and collaboration with other institutions.

Furthermore, the findings of this study expand on prior research, specifically Nurhidayati’s (2015) study on school principals’ decision-making for quality improvement and Aziz’s (2022) research on school principals’ decision-making during a pandemic. This study delved further into the decision-making process for face-to-face learning and discovered that the most relevant component was the Islamic boarding school’s internal state, i.e., its security. It is a novel result that has not been observed in previous research. Thus, it implies that schools are not required to compel students to engage in online learning during the pandemic, creating many complications. However, there is another option, which is to provide dorms for students attending Islamic boarding schools.

C. Conclusion

In this study, MA Miftahunnajah Sleman's face-to-face learning decisions were influenced by four major factors: 1) internal conditions, including boarding school security, student order, parental involvement, geographical conditions, and curriculum structure; 2) information availability; 3) external conditions, covering community involvement and collaboration with other schools; 4) the personality and skills of the decision-makers. These elements were interdependent, but the Islamic boarding school’s security was the most crucial. In addition to online education, it demonstrates that another option for pandemic-related education is face-to-face instruction through the Islamic boarding school or dormitory system, considering that several issues are associated with online education. In such instances, officials can support establishing institutions with dormitories or Islamic boarding schools as locations for students to reside and study, rather than requiring online learning. Additionally, national standards governing school licensure are required for Islamic boarding schools or dorms undertaking face-to-face education.

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