The Implementation of Blended Learning in Islamic Elementary Schools during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Education in Indonesia has undergone many significant changes due to the Covid-19 pandemic, including its learning system. Blended learning is a combination of offline and online learning models. The purpose of this study is to describe the implementation of the blended learning model during the COVID-19 pandemic at the islamic elementary school level. Blended learning can be implemented either online or face-to-face. This qualitative descriptive study conducted observation, interviews, and documentation to collect the data. The blended learning model during the COVID-19 pandemic was potentially capable of delivering more innovative learning. However, several problems experienced by teachers, students, and parents were also noticed. Teachers' problems included limited media to deliver material in online learning. Meanwhile, the student's problem lay in their lack of learning independence. While parents' role in guiding their children was pivotal, not all parents were capable of doing it. Students could improve their understanding by confirming directly with the teacher during the offline class, and parents were helped by a direct explanation from the teacher during the offline class.

Keywords: blended learning, online learning, innovation, media

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2019 stated that more than 200 countries worldwide were affected by the coronavirus or commonly known as Covid 19 (Selviani, 2021). The viral outbreak forced the Indonesian government to issue several policies to break the viral spread. These policies include movement control order, eliminating holidays or collective leave, large-scale social restrictions (PSBB), and mudik prohibition (Ihwanah, 2020). It also affected education around the globe, as direct classroom learning activities should be shifted to online settings from students' homes (Rigianti, 2020).

The term online learning is interchangeable with the term e-learning (Febriyana, 2022), i.e., a learning model that utilizes technology to deliver learning activities. Several platforms were used to carry out the learning process, including WhatsApp groups, websites, zoom, Google Meet, and Google Classroom, among others (Sofyan & Abdul, 2019). Applying this model, teachers are no longer the sole source of information during the learning process. They are demanded to have adequate skills in utilizing technology and the internet to keep up with the 4th industrial revolution era and tech-savvy generations (Yanti, 2020).

The shift to online learning systems has brought problems to students, teachers, and parents. While students tend to be bored and find it difficult to absorb the material delivered in online learning settings unless it is explained face-to-face, teachers find it difficult to convey material that may be difficult for students and the limited facilities and infrastructure used. At the same time, parents find it difficult to accompany their children during

the online learning process due to a lack of capacity, time, and cost. These obstacles have given birth to an innovative blended learning model, which is expected to make students more interested in the learning process and help them achieve their learning goals (Mukarromah, 2022; Namyssova et al, 2019).

Blended learning refers to a combination of online and offline learning models (Menggo, 2022). It allows students to access learning materials according to the teacher's guidelines and ask directly during online learning when they encounter difficulty understanding the materials. This model is reported to be suitable during the COVID-19 pandemic (Amanto, 2021). According to Riinawati (2021) & Dziuban (2018), blended learning is a combination of online learning via the internet and gadgets and offline learning carried out directly in the classroom. This learning model divides the class into two groups. Each group engages in an online session every two days. Teachers, students, and parents' collaboration are necessary to ensure an optimal learning process. Graham, as cited in Rahmani (2022), define blended learning as a model that combines various modalities of learning media, methods, theories, and pedagogical dimensions and combines online with face-to-face settings.

Blended learning helps students understand the material and allows the teacher to explain the material to students directly (Apandi, 2020). It is also considered to increase students' learning interests and outcomes. Blended learning can also improve learning outcomes and increase student interest in learning more effectively than online learning (Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal in Nurhadi, 2020; Lozano-Lozano et al., 2020).

While online learning limits students' interaction with teachers (Kant, 2014), blended learning complements this shortcoming and is considered more effective and efficient because it combines online and face-to-face learning. While teachers' interaction with students is limited during the online class, the face-to-face session complements this shortcoming (Poncela, 2013; Birbal et al., 2018).

Seeing the importance of blended learning as a choice of current learning strategies, Graham (in Vaughan, 2007) argues that teacher prefers to implement blended learning over conventional learning because it offers better pedagogy, increased access and flexibility, and increased cost benefits.

Blended learning also offers several advantages, including flexible online access to learning materials. In this regard, teachers could invite students to read and understand learning materials before starting learning activities. Tests can also be managed online using applications capable of encouraging students to complete the test. The learning materials could also be shared with students to be studied anytime and anywhere.

Several studies on blended learning strategy during the covid-19 pandemic have been carried out, such as Ulfah and Yuliawati (2021), Suwarti et al. (2022), and Watrianthos et al. (2021). This study took a different standpoint from previous studies by focusing on Islamic elementary school learning, using a different method and data analysis.

Built upon previous studies on blended learning during the Covid 19 pandemic, this study provides a detailed analysis of the implementation of blended learning in the islamic elementary school context.

METHODS

This study applied a qualitative descriptive design to find out and describe a phenomenon in natural settings (Fadli, 2021; Sugiarto, 2015). It specifically aimed to capture detailed information about the implementation of blended learning during the covid 19 pandemic at Tarbiyatul Aulad Islamic Elementary School Jombor, Tuntang district, Semarang Regency (Hereafter MI Tarbiyatul Aulad). The details to be sought out included 1) the problems found in the implementation of blended learning and 2) the process of blended learning implementation. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were performed in the 4th-grade classroom during face-to-face session with 15 students and during online learning by visiting three students' homes. Interviews were conducted with the school principal, four classroom teachers, six students, and six parents. A questionnaire was also used to explore information relevant to the online and blended learning process. The questionnaire was distributed to teachers to explore the learning-process-related information and to parents and students to explore obstacles they faced when participating in the online learning process. An interview guideline was prepared prior to the interview process. The interview was voice recorded using cellphones. Researchers also took notes during the interviews. Relevant previous studies were used to validate the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The observations and interviews revealed the advantages and disadvantages of the blended learning model in MI Tarbiyatul Aulad.

Researchers conducted observations and interviews first. The first interview involved the school principal, followed by interviews with four classroom teachers representing the two upper-level and lower-level classes. This study found advantages and problems perceived by teachers, students, and parents when implementing blended learning in MI Tarbiyatul Aulad. The following sections present the perceived problems.

Teachers' perceived problems in Online Learning

Various applications are available to support the online learning process, such as WhatsApp (WA), Google Form, Google Classroom, Google Drive, Youtube, WA group, Tuweb, Zoom Meeting, Google Meet, etc. However, not all applications suit the condition of students and parents in MI Tarbiyatul Aulad. For instance, while Zoom meeting is superior for the learning process as it allows teachers and students directly interact, it requires a large internet quota and a stable internet connection. As students in this study did not own a smartphone, they needed to adjust to the parents' schedules to use their phones for learning purposes. This condition needs to be taken into account when deciding to use the Zoom meeting application for the learning process.

In addition to application software, students' learning autonomy also emerged as a problem. As online learning lacked face-to-face interactions between teachers and students, students were required to independently complete assignments and understand the material. However, most students failed to understand the materials and required more detailed explanations (Nila, 2021).

Sari (2021) reported that the obstacles experienced by teachers during online learning included learning applications, internet connection and devices, learning management, assessment, and supervision. In the same vein, this study found that internet connection, application software, learning management, assessment objectivity, supervision, and limited access to a mobile phone were the obstacles perceived in the online learning process.

Students' perceived problems in Online Learning

Online learning has been carried out for almost 2 years, and children began to become bored with online schools, as they are used to going to school, meeting and playing with their friends, and can also interact directly with teachers. While online learning requires islamic elementary school students to study independently at home, they need a lot of guidance from teachers and parents. Since students could not learn independently during the online learning implementation, they failed to understand the learning materials. As a result, students were discouraged from doing assignments.

This finding is consistent with Haryadi & Fitria (2021), who reported that students found it difficult to understand the content of the materials presented in online learning. Students' lack of learning motivation during learning online also emerged as another problem, which could be caused by the lack of familiarity of students with online learning and limited facilities for online learning (Rahman, 2020).

Every child has their own learning characteristic, an aspect that should be taken into account when developing a learning model and

materials. Learning interest and motivation also greatly influence children's learning participation and engagement in doing the given tasks.

Parents' perceived problems in Online Learning

Online learning requires parents to play an active role in guiding their children to study at home. However, many parents were also busy and did not have sufficient time to monitor their children's learning progress. This condition should be a concern, as elementary school-aged children, especially those in the lower class, highly need their parents' guidance in learning. This study also found that students often did not do their homework because their parents did not monitor their learning progress. In the case where their mothers are housewives, students were monitored when doing assignments, yet they did not understand their children's learning materials and failed to guide their children in doing the assignments. Parents play an important role in determining the success of online learning.

According to Utami (2021) & Rafiqa et al. (2022), obstacles in online learning also stem from parents' and teachers' limited ability to use the gadget as a device to support the learning process, in addition to their unpreparedness to assist students. Another problem deals with internet connection.

Responding to obstacles, MI Tarbiyatul Aulad applied a new learning model called blended learning. Blended learning is a learning model that combines offline and online learning and is known to help prevent Covid-19 spread. When applying this learning model, the first step the school needs to take is to identify the urgency of blended learning implementation and to list the facilities and infrastructure needed to implement this method. The

second step is to design learning techniques using the blended learning method, including platforms to be used to support asynchronous/indirect learning and applications to support face-to-face. The third step is to ensure teachers', students', and parents' readiness.

In MI Tarbiyatul Aulad, the blended learning was performed through several stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation stages.

Planning stage

In the planning stage, teachers developed lesson plans for blended learning and presented the document in doc. or pdf. file formats. The lesson plan presents a detailed explanation of learning objectives, duration, media, steps, and assessment. With the implementation of the COVID-19 emergency curriculum, schools were also required to strictly adhere to health protocols.

The planning stage is the most important stage in ensuring proper learning program implementation (Wicadee, 2017). It includes goal-setting activities, determining required duration and methods, and communicating the plan to related parties to help them understand and to implement the program (Widodo, 2020). According to Ikhwan (2020), the lesson plan includes the curriculum used, lesson duration, objectives, learning materials, and evaluation.

The planning stage carried out at MI Tarbiyatul Aulad Jombor was designed and prepared in such a way as to achieve optimal results. The lesson plans were designed using blended learning to properly adjust to the online and face-to-face learning.

Implementation Stage

MI Tarbiyatul Aulad applied the Covid-19 emergency curriculum, by which its learning program was made of online and offline learning at a 50:50 ratio. Applying this ratio, half of the class engaged in face-to-face classroom learning while the other half participated in online learning. Each class consisted of thirty students on average. Hence, fifteen students engaged in offline classrooms while the rest participated in online learning. As such, students participated in face-to-face learning three times a week.

The instructional time was also shortened from 35 minutes to 30 minutes/lesson hour. The learning process started from 7 AM to 10 AM. It began by performing *dhuha* prayer and reciting Quran verses. Every Friday, *tahlilan* was held. The implementation of blended learning also adhered to health protocols. A teacher was assigned to check the students' body temperature before entering the school area. School members were also required to always wear masks in the school environment, perform physical distancing, and wash their hands diligently.

The online classroom started simultaneously with the offline ones, but it was more flexible because assignments were collected online. Like the offline classroom, online learning also began with dhuha prayer, during which the parents' guidance was needed. Teachers presented materials and conducted evaluations online. The platforms often used by MI Tarbiyatul Aulad Jombor teachers were Whatsapp, youtube, Google Form, and Google Classroom. These applications were also adapted to the material to be delivered. When students did not understand certain topics, they could ask teachers during learning hours. Learning objectives and evaluation forms

were adjusted to the lesson plans according to the respective subjects that have been made. According to Dwiyogo (in Rahmani, 2022), blended learning should consider several compositions: a) 25/75%, meaning that the face-to-face (offline) activities are done by 25% of the total time allotment, while 75% is for online activities; b) 50/50%, meaning that the process of face-to-face (offline) activities is done by 50% of the total time allotment, while 50% is for online activities; and c) 75/25%, meaning that the process of face-to-face (offline) activities are done by 75% of time allotment, while 25% is for online activities.

The implementation of the blended learning model requires careful consideration from teachers, students, and parents. The implementation of blended learning at MI Tarbiyatul Aulad Jombor applies to the second composition (i.e., 50/50%), where students carried out online learning for 3 days and offline learning for 3 days each week. Despite the limited lesson hours, students of MI Tarbiyatul Aulad still engaged in morning reflections before the learning began. Thus, they were not only focused on learning.

Evaluation Stage

The assessment process in blended learning at MI Tarbiyatul Aulad Jombor was carried out both directly and online in attitude, knowledge, and skill aspects. The assessment of daily assignments during offline learning can be carried out directly in the classroom. Meanwhile, the assessment of daily assignments for the online session was also carried out directly during the online learning at school. Regarding daily tests, teachers utilize Google Forms or Google Classroom to organize the test. The midterm and final exams were carried out offline at school by dividing each class into two

batches- morning and afternoon batches- in order to avoid crowds and prevent Covid-19 transmission. The 2013 Curriculum applied so-called authentic assessment. Although the assessment of attitudes, knowledge, and skills can be carried out during online learning, it focused more on attitude and knowledge assessment, while students' attitudes were viewed from their responsibilities in doing the tasks, and the knowledge assessment was done by seeing their work results.

Evaluation is an effort to score by seeing observable matters, such as objects, processes, performance, people, and activities, among others (Idrus, 2019). The score can be obtained by comparing the assessed object to the predetermined criteria and evaluators or by conducting measurements (Kadry, 2019). The assessment system applied in the 2013 curriculum is known as authentic assessment and covers three domains: knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Yasir et al., 2021). Susanti et al. (2021) added that evaluation can be carried out through performance tests, observation, assignments, written tests, oral tests, portfolios, self-assessment, and peer assessment.

The blended learning at MI Tarbiyatul Aulad has complied with this assessment system both in online and offline learning activities. The learning evaluation was also adjusted to the delivered materials. The application used during online learning should also be adjusted to the learning material.

In addition, there are two supporting and debilitating factors in the implementation of blended learning in MI Tarbiyatul Aulad.

Supporting Factors of Blended Learning During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Several supporting factors were found during the implementation of the blended learning model during the pandemic carried out by Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Tarbiyatul Aulad. The government also plays an important role in supporting the implementation of blended learning, as it enforces the School from Home program during the pandemic. Despite the obstacles, schools were provided with opportunities to try conducting online learning. Over time, the obstacles could be overcome by applying blended learning, a model that combines online and face-to-face learning processes. Teachers' quality also serves as the most influential factor in supporting the learning process, as they regulate the course of the learning, determining the outcomes of the learning process. Ramadani et al. (2019) state that teachers have an important role in the success of blended learning process. The roles of teachers in blended learning include planner, implementer, motivator, and evaluator. A teacher's responsibility is to properly master the applicable curriculum, understand the characteristics of students, empower existing facilities and resources, so that all of them are used as components in developing learning plans and designs. Technology is also one of the most prominent supporting factors as it provides access to knowledge and facilitates online classes through communication media (e.g., Whatsapp). In the same vein, Riyanto & Mumtahana (2018); Hidayat (2021) state that the supporting factors of blended learning include: 1) personal; 2) self-development; 3) technology; and 4) innovation aspects. Among these four

factors, innovation was found to be the most dominant factor in blended learning.

Debilitating Factors of Blended Learning During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Several debilitating factors of blended learning at MI Tarbiyatul Aulad during the Covid-19 pandemic were reported, including shorter lesson hours, poor and unstable internet connection, students' lack of learning motivation, and teachers' limited ability to deliver interesting and meaningful learning processes.

Teachers' thorough preparation is necessary for all three stages of learning. Students and parents' support also plays pivotal roles in ensuring optimal learning outcomes. Relying solely on online learning was found not to be effective, as islamic elementary school students have not possessed learning independence. Most lower-class students have not understood the basic concepts of reading and writing, let alone autonomous learning. Meanwhile, the higher-class students would find it difficult to understand the materials when delivered online as they become more complex. The material complexity for upper-class students is the main reason behind the implementation of blended learning. Blended learning is considered more effective and efficient to be applied as it complements online learning and is helpful in achieving learning objectives. This study finding is in line with Hidayat (2021); Ubaidillah et al.'s (2022); Kintu et al. (2017) study, which found that teachers' poor technological ability, students' absenteeism, and limited time allotment emerge as the debilitating factors of the online learning process. Teachers perceive obstacles in all three stages of the blended learning process.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed various life aspects, including the education sector. This study documents the problems in the online learning process perceived by teachers, students, and parents. These problems stem from the limited facilities and infrastructure, student conditioning, students' learning interest, and parents' role in guiding children to study at home. It is necessary to apply the blended learning model, a model that combines offline and online learning.

The implementation of the blended learning model at MI Tarbiyatul Aulad Jombor included three stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. In the planning stage, teachers design lesson plans that explain in detail the learning design to be carried out both in online and face-to-face learning. The lesson plans describe in detail the learning objectives, basic competencies, learning indicators, learning steps, learning resources, learning media, and the evaluation questions and assessment rubrics for assessing knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The implementation stage at MI Tarbiyatul Aulad Jombor used the 50/50% concept, where students engaged in online and face-to-face learning in a 50:50 ratio. The evaluation stage was also adjusted to online and face-to-face settings. The application used was also adapted to the material and form of the question. Three aspects were assessed: knowledge, attitudes, and skills. As relying solely on online learning was considered less effective, it is complemented by the implementation of face-to-face learning. However, teachers', students', and parents' supports are necessary to ensure successful learning outcome. This learning model is

considered to be more effective to be applied to islamic elementary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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