

Knowledge, Skills, Practices, and Jawi Literacy Among Islamic Education Primary School Teachers

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600738>

Received: 14 June 2026; Accepted: 19 June 2026; Published: 04 July 2026

ABSTRACT

The quality of Islamic education in primary schools significantly depends on teacher competencies, which may vary based on geographical locations. Understanding these variations is crucial for educational policy development and teacher professional development programs. This study aimed to examine the differences in knowledge, skills, practices, and Jawi literacy among Islamic education primary school teachers based on their school locations in Sabah, Malaysia. A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted involving 341 Islamic education primary school teachers in Sabah. Data were collected using Jawi literacy tests and structured questionnaires. The sample comprised 75 teachers (21.9%) from urban schools and 268 teachers (78.1%) from rural schools. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to determine significant differences between urban and rural teachers across four competency domains. The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between urban and rural teachers in knowledge ($F=0.401$, $p=0.527$), skills ($F=0.022$, $p=0.882$), practices ($F=0.186$, $p=0.667$), and literacy ($F=1.115$, $p=0.292$). To conclude, contrary to common assumptions, location does not significantly impact Islamic education teachers' competencies in Sabah. This suggests that other factors such as socioeconomic background, teaching quality, or resource accessibility may be more influential in determining teacher competencies.

Keywords: Islamic education, Jawi literacy, urban and rural, competency domains.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Malaysian education, the quality of Islamic education teaching at the primary school level plays an important role in shaping students' religious understanding and moral development. Teacher competency, encompassing knowledge, skills, practices, and literacy, serves as a fundamental determinant of educational quality (Abdullah & Rahman, 2019). The significance of teacher competency becomes even more critical in Islamic education, where teachers are not only expected to deliver academic content but also to serve as moral exemplars and spiritual guides for young learners.

In Malaysia, the geographical divide between urban and rural areas has long been associated with educational disparities, raising concerns about equitable access to quality Islamic education. Sabah, as one of Malaysia's largest states with diverse geographical landscapes, presents unique challenges in educational delivery. The state's educational landscape is characterized by a significant urban-rural divide, with approximately 60% of schools located in rural areas (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020). This geographical distribution raises important questions about whether location influences teacher competencies in Islamic education.

Despite extensive research on general educational disparities between urban and rural contexts, there exists a significant research gap specifically examining Islamic education teacher competencies across different geographical locations in Malaysia. Previous studies have predominantly focused on general teacher competencies or have been conducted in other educational contexts, leaving a critical void in understanding how location affects the specialized competencies required for Islamic education teaching. This gap is particularly pronounced in the Malaysian context, where Islamic education holds special significance in the national curriculum and requires teachers to possess unique combinations of religious knowledge, pedagogical skills, and cultural sensitivity (Ibrahim, 2015; Hasan & Ahmad, 2022).

Furthermore, while international studies have documented urban-rural educational disparities, the findings may not be directly applicable to the Malaysian Islamic education context due to differences in educational systems, cultural contexts, and teacher preparation programs. The lack of empirical evidence specifically addressing Islamic education teacher competencies based on geographical location has resulted in policy decisions and resource allocation strategies that may not be optimally informed by evidence-based research (Tinmaz et al., 2022). This research gap is critical because assumptions about location-based competency differences may lead to inappropriate resource allocation, ineffective professional development programs, and potentially inequitable educational outcomes for students in different geographical areas. Without empirical evidence, educational policymakers and administrators may continue to operate under unverified assumptions about the relationship between school location and teacher competencies in Islamic education.

Therefore, this study addresses this significant research gap by providing the first comprehensive empirical examination of Islamic education teacher competencies across urban and rural locations in Sabah, Malaysia. The findings will contribute essential knowledge to the field and provide evidence-based insights for educational policy development, resource allocation, and teacher professional development programs.

The study aims to examine the distribution of Islamic education primary school teachers across urban and rural locations in Sabah, determine whether significant differences exist in teacher competencies based on school location, and provide recommendations for policy development and teacher professional development programs. The research questions guiding this study are: What is the distribution of Islamic education primary school teachers across urban and rural locations in Sabah? Are there significant differences in knowledge, skills, practices, and literacy between urban and rural Islamic education teachers?

This research contributes to the understanding of teacher competency distribution in Islamic education, providing valuable insights for educational policymakers, curriculum developers, and teacher training institutions. The significance of this study extends beyond academic contribution, as it has practical implications for ensuring educational equity and quality in Islamic education across different geographical contexts in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher competency encompasses multiple dimensions that collectively determine teaching effectiveness. The Malaysian Teacher Standards (Standard Guru Malaysia) identifies several core competencies including pedagogical knowledge, subject matter expertise, classroom management skills, and professional practices (Teacher Education Division, 2019). In the context of Islamic education, additional competencies include Quranic literacy, Islamic jurisprudence understanding, and the ability to integrate Islamic values into teaching practices (Mohd Yusof & Ahmad, 2020). Research consistently highlights disparities between urban and rural educational contexts. Rural schools often face challenges including limited technological resources, fewer professional development opportunities, and difficulty retaining qualified teachers (Hassan & Ibrahim, 2017). However, some studies suggest that these disparities may be diminishing due to government initiatives and improved connectivity (Aziz & Rahman, 2020).

Islamic education requires specialized competencies beyond general teaching skills. Teachers must demonstrate proficiency in Arabic language, Quranic recitation, Islamic theology, and the ability to contextualize Islamic teachings for young learners (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2021). The complexity of these requirements makes Islamic education teacher competency a unique area of study that requires specialized research attention. Malaysia's commitment to educational equity is reflected in various policies aimed at reducing urban-rural disparities. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 emphasizes equal access to quality education regardless of geographical location (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, the effectiveness of these policies in specifically addressing Islamic education teacher competencies remains underexplored in empirical research. International studies have documented various factors that influence teacher competencies, including access to professional development, resource availability, and institutional support. However, the applicability of these findings to the Malaysian Islamic education context requires careful consideration due to cultural, religious, and systemic differences. This highlights the importance of conducting context-specific research to understand the unique dynamics affecting Islamic education teacher competencies in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine differences in teacher competencies based on school location. The target population comprised all Islamic education primary school teachers in Sabah. A total of 341 teachers were selected from both urban and rural schools using appropriate sampling techniques to ensure representativeness of the population. Two primary instruments were employed in this study. First, a written literacy test was administered to obtain direct data from Islamic education teachers who teach Jawi in Islamic education subjects. This test was used to assess the level of Jawi mastery among Islamic education teachers through the implementation of a Jawi spelling test containing 100 words. The test was designed to identify the level of knowledge and skills of Islamic education teachers in Jawi mastery. The written test consisted of two sections. The first section contained 50 words, where Islamic education teachers were asked to convert spelling from Rumi script to Jawi script in the space provided. The second section also contained 50 words, but in this section, Islamic education teachers were given answer choices and asked to circle the correct Jawi spelling. This test was conducted individually by Islamic education teachers within a time period of 20 minutes. The written test instrument was developed through adaptation from test questions that had been used by Rosimah binti Haji Ibrahim (2015). These questions had gone through a validation process by five experts who acted as the research instrument validation panel. The arrangement of test questions was made based on Jawi rules, which include Derlung rules, KafGa rules, Kt12, rules for three syllables and more (native Malay words), rules for three syllables and more (English loanwords), A/HA rules, derived words, proper nouns, Hamzah letters written without a house, Hamzah letters in the middle or at the end written according to their position in Arabic, Hamzah letters without a house in Arabic loanwords, Hamzah letters used as substitutes for alif letters, and diphthongs [oi] written using wau-ya letters. Second, a structured competency questionnaire was administered to assess teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices in Islamic education. Both instruments were validated through expert review and pilot testing to ensure reliability and validity.

Data collection was conducted through direct administration of the instruments to participating teachers in their respective schools. Ethical considerations were carefully observed, including obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring confidentiality of responses. The data collection process was standardized across all locations to minimize potential bias. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to characterize the sample and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to test for significant differences between urban and rural teachers across four competency domains: knowledge, skills, practices, and literacy. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. All analyses were conducted using appropriate statistical software to ensure accuracy and reliability of results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of school location data for 341 respondents, there were two categories of school locations assessed. The data shows that the majority of respondents, 268 respondents (78.1%), were in the rural category. In contrast, 75 respondents (21.9%) were in the urban category. This distribution reflects the geographical reality of Sabah's educational landscape, where rural schools significantly outnumber urban schools.

School Location	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Urban	75	21.9
Rural	268	78.1
Total	341	100.0

Based on One way ANOVA analysis, no significant differences were found between school locations (urban and rural) with all variables namely Knowledge, Skills, Practices, and Literacy. The p-values for all variables were greater than 0.05, indicating that school location does not have a significant effect on these variables. The literacy assessment, specifically focusing on Jawi mastery through the 100-word spelling test, revealed comparable performance levels between urban and rural teachers across both sections of the test.

Variable	F-value	p-value	Interpretation
Knowledge	0.401	0.527	No significant difference
Skills	0.022	0.882	No significant difference
Practices	0.186	0.667	No significant difference
Literacy (Jawi)	1.115	0.292	No significant difference

The finding that location does not significantly affect teacher competencies is intriguing and challenges conventional assumptions about urban-rural educational disparities. These results indicate that the school location factor (urban or rural) does not significantly influence respondents' levels of knowledge, skills, practices, and literacy, including Jawi literacy as measured through the comprehensive 100-word spelling test. This finding has profound implications for understanding the current state of Islamic education in Malaysia and the effectiveness of educational equity policies. The Jawi literacy test results are particularly noteworthy, as they demonstrate that teachers in both urban and rural locations possess comparable mastery of Jawi script across various linguistic rules and contexts. The test's comprehensive coverage of Jawi rules, including Derlung rules, KafGa rules, syllabic patterns, Arabic loanwords, and complex orthographic conventions, provides a robust assessment of teachers' fundamental literacy skills in Islamic education. The absence of significant differences in this critical competency area suggests that standardized teacher preparation programs have been effective in ensuring consistent Jawi literacy levels regardless of eventual teaching locations (Mohd Khairul Anuar et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2025). Several factors may explain these findings. First, Malaysia's centralized teacher training system ensures consistent training standards for all Islamic education teachers, regardless of their eventual posting locations. This standardization may have successfully minimized location-based competency gaps, particularly in specialized areas such as Jawi literacy. Second, various government initiatives aimed at reducing educational disparities appear to have been effective in ensuring teachers in both urban and rural locations have access to comparable resources and development opportunities. Third, improved access to technology and internet connectivity in rural areas may have helped teachers access learning materials and professional development programs, thereby reducing traditional barriers to professional growth.

The absence of location-based differences suggests that current resource allocation strategies may be effective in maintaining educational equity across geographical boundaries (Rahim & Yusof, 2023). This finding challenges the common assumption that rural teachers are disadvantaged compared to their urban counterparts and indicates that Malaysia's educational policies may have successfully addressed traditional urban-rural disparities in the context of Islamic education. However, these findings also raise important questions about other factors that may influence teacher competencies (Yusof & Zulkifli, 2021). If location is not a significant determinant, then individual factors such as years of experience, educational qualifications, access to specialized training, or personal motivation may play more important roles in determining teacher competency levels. Future research should explore these alternative factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what influences Islamic education teacher competencies. The implications of these findings extend beyond academic interest to practical policy considerations. The results suggest that professional development programs can be designed based on individual teacher needs rather than location-based assumptions. This could lead to more efficient resource allocation and more effective professional development strategies that address actual competency gaps rather than perceived geographical disadvantages.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that geographical location does not significantly influence Islamic education teachers' competencies in Sabah's primary schools. Although the majority of teachers (78.1%) serve in rural schools, they demonstrate comparable levels of knowledge, skills, practices, and literacy to teachers in urban schools. The comprehensive Jawi literacy assessment, encompassing 100 words across diverse orthographic rules and contexts, further confirms that location-based disparities in fundamental Islamic

education competencies are not evident in the current educational landscape. The absence of significant location-based differences has important implications for educational policy and practice. It suggests that current initiatives aimed at reducing urban-rural disparities have been effective and should be maintained. However, attention should shift to identifying and addressing other factors that may influence teacher competencies, such as individual qualifications, experience, and access to specialized training opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, policymakers should maintain current initiatives that have successfully minimized location-based gaps in teacher competencies while focusing attention on other factors that may influence teacher performance. Second, professional development programs should adopt individualized approaches based on specific teacher needs rather than location-based assumptions. Third, educational technology should continue to be leveraged to ensure equitable access to professional development opportunities across all geographical areas. The study acknowledges certain limitations, including its cross-sectional design which limits causal inferences, its geographical scope limited to Sabah, and the fact that other potentially influential factors were not examined. Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal studies, expansion to other states, and investigation of additional factors that may influence teacher competencies. This research contributes important understanding about Islamic education teacher competencies in Malaysia and demonstrates the effectiveness of educational equity policies. The finding that location does not significantly impact competencies, including specialized skills such as Jawi literacy, is encouraging and suggests that Malaysia's commitment to educational equity has yielded positive results. However, continued research is needed to identify other factors that influence educational quality and ensure all students receive high-quality Islamic education regardless of their geographical location.

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