



Curricular responsiveness to the Covid-19 crisis: The case of Indonesia

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Accepted: 22 December 2020 / Published online: 4 March 2021
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Abstract This article focuses on the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on education systems in Indonesia. It describes and illuminates various curricular responses, from nation-based actions to policies by the office of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. The article asks: How does the Covid-19 crisis affect education systems, activities, policies, and practices in the Indonesia archipelago? How has the central government responded to the Covid-19 crisis within educational institutions? What do these institutions' curricular responses look like? What are some of the guiding curricular principles of schooling, teaching, and learning emerging and circulating during the Covid-19 crisis and within educational institutions' efforts to revive educational life, possibilities, and continuance? It is hoped that this article on the case of Indonesia will promote and contribute to new sharing of the global understanding of curriculum responsiveness, teaching, learning, policy, and practice during the current Covid-19 crisis.

Keywords Curriculum · Covid-19 · Indonesia · Crisis · Innovation

Indonesia is an archipelago country comprised of more than 17,000 islands divided into 34 provinces that have distinct cultural and regional differences. Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country, with more than 264 million people, including over 44 million schoolchildren and 2.7 million teachers, according to data by the General Directorate of Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, and Secondary Education, under the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan 2020). In 1984, six years of compulsory education became a national mandate, extended to nine years in 1994 (Suharti 2013). Indonesia's education system includes six years of elementary education or of Islamic elementary education (called

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Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, or MI); three years of junior secondary education or of Islamic junior secondary education (called Madrasah Tsanawiyah, or MTs); and three years of senior secondary education. This last one can be taken in one of three types of school: senior secondary school (SMA), Islamic senior secondary school (Madrasah Aliyah), or senior vocational school (SMK). The Ministry of Religious Affairs manages the madrasahs, while the Ministry of Education and Culture manages elementary, junior secondary, and senior secondary education (senior secondary and senior vocational schools). These options may be followed by four years of undergraduate university education, or from one to four years of higher professional education, culminating in multiple years of postgraduate education. Prior to elementary education, children can attend noncompulsory kindergartens and early-childhood education providers.

As of the writing of this article in October 20, 2020, due to the Covid-19 crisis, all Indonesian schools—elementary through higher education institutions—have been closed since mid-March 2020. The scope of these closings is wider than Indonesia has ever experienced before. The closure was provisionally to continue through mid-June 2020, depending on the development of the Covid-19 situation. On June 15, 2020, the ministers of education and culture; religious affairs; health; and home affairs issued a joint statement that the academic year of 2020–2021 for early-childhood, elementary, and secondary education was to start in July 2020. Face-to-face instruction would begin at that time, according to the development of Covid-19 situation and preparedness in established risk zones. Zones are organized by colors: green, yellow, orange, and red. Schools located in green and yellow zones can open and start face-to-face instruction after obtaining permission from the Education Department or Religious Affairs Department in their province or regency. Schools located in orange and red zones will continue study activities from home.

During the first three weeks of September 2020, schools were instructed to organize a face-to-face instruction test-run on-site, called “teaching and learning simulation and evaluation process of face-to-face instruction”. During this simulation, schools developed specific rules regarding how many students could come to school at a time and on which days of the week; the length of face-to-face instruction per day; health protocols for all students, teachers, and staffs concerning masks, hand sanitizer, physical contact; the ins and outs of school buildings, lunch preparation, uniform regulation, and parent or guardian consent to the simulation. Some schools hold face-to-face instruction for about three hours per day and allow the students to attend school for three days per week during the simulation. Depending on a school’s evaluation of its teaching and learning simulation, schools may continue the face-to-face instructions. In many provinces, Covid-19 emergency status with no face-to-face instruction is extended until December 31, 2020.

The Covid-19 crisis is affecting education systems, activities, policies, and practices within the Indonesian archipelago. The Ministry of Education and Culture has an important role both in managing culture and in governing the education sector. This role entails policy crafting, creation, and implementation in all layers of the education system, in addition to facilitation of educational activities, coordination and mentorship in the education sector, improvement of education quality, and research and development in education—among many of its other functions. Given its authority in these areas, the ministry, acting on behalf of the centralized government, has primary responsibility in the area of culture and education during the Covid-19 crisis. Its work, therefore, is an integral part of this curricular responsiveness discussion and analysis.

In this article, I use various archival texts by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Provincial Education Department, and local schools vis-à-vis schools’ activities and policies during the pandemic situation. These texts cover many aspects of curriculum, such as

emerging knowledge; how teaching should occur; how children should learn; the organization and practice of formal schooling; changes in instructional practices, classrooms, and the cultures of teaching (Cuban 1993). The scope of the curriculum that I discuss here is mainly within elementary and secondary education, with some examples from early childhood education.

Ministry of Education and Culture response to the Covid-19 crisis

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia, during early March 2020, the minister of education and culture of the Republic of Indonesia released a formal announcement letter about the prevention of the Covid-19 virus in educational settings (Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan 2020a). The minister's letter is addressed to all heads of provincial education offices, regency- and city-level education offices, higher education service offices, leaders of universities, and headmasters in the Indonesian archipelago. It includes three main categories of actions: (1) internal educational-institution preventive measures, be they formal, nonformal, and/or informal; (2) educational institutions' continuous reporting on the health and conditions of their staff, teachers, students, and parents; and (3) coordination amongst local educational institutions and the Education Department, the Higher Education Department, and the Health Department.

The section on preventive measures to be taken within institutions articulates ways to optimize the school health effort. It advises establishing facilities for hand washing in various strategic locations throughout the educational institutions, instructing all community members on how to effectively wash their hands. It also counsels all educational community members to practice a clean and healthy lifestyle at school and to organize the cleaning of classrooms and all other areas of the school—that is, to delegate such work to skilled cleaning staff equipped with quality disinfectants. It instructs that all foods provided at these institutions be well cooked, and reminds community members not to share food, drinks, or musical instruments that contact the mouth. Further, it encourages all persons at the schools to avoid such direct physical contact as shaking hands, kissing hands, and hugging. It instructs that schools postpone educational activities in which large groups of people gather together inside or outside the institutions, such as school camping and study tours, in addition to limiting outside guests. It directs schools to ask those who have traveled to Covid-19-affected countries (listed by the World Health Organization) not to visit, drop off, or pick up their children.

In the second category of actions in the formal announcement letter, educational institutions are asked to report regularly on their situation and the condition of their staff, teachers, students, and parents. Each educational institution is asked to monitor its personnel's absences, to grant permission to whoever is sick to not attend office work or teaching duties, not to penalize those who miss work due to sickness, not to implement incentive-based policies linked to attendance, and to report to the Health Department, Education Department, and Higher Education Department when absences increase due to respiratory disease. It also recommends transferring teaching assignments from staff who are out sick to teachers who can substitute, and to consult the Education Department regarding the absenteeism rate, to assess whether teaching and learning activities should be rescheduled or temporarily postponed. It asks that schools report presumed Covid-19 infections to the

local office of the Ministry of Health, so that they can then request a testing follow-up by the Ministry of Health—to be conducted at the educational institution.

The third main action step outlined in the official letter involves the initiative of the educational institutions to learn about Health Department plans and preparations regarding the Covid-19 pandemic.

As the pandemic situation developed, the Indonesian minister of education and culture released a follow-up letter about online learning and working from home to prevent the spread of Covid-19 (Menteri Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan 2020b). This second letter is addressed to all leaders of state and private universities, the heads of the higher education service, the heads of provincial education offices, those at the regency and city levels of education offices, and the unit heads of Technical Application under the Ministry of Education and Culture. The letter requests that all addressees emphasize to their personnel the need to follow through with the Covid-19 prevention protocols that the President's Staff Office delivered, and to ensure that their implementation of Covid-19 measures is well practiced and in accordance with the minister of education and culture's first announcement letter. The second letter also calls for the postponement of events that invite many attendees to be replaced by videoconferences or other online communications. It asks the leaders of educational institutions to work with the local Health Department to organize health examinations when they have employees or students who experience difficulty breathing, fever, or cough. It also directs these leaders to create guidelines regarding the implementation of working from home and the online learning, according to their particular local needs. Specifically for affected regions, the Ministry of Education and Culture enforces the implementation of online learning at home for all school and university students, the remote performance of work activities, and teaching or lecturing from home using videoconference, digital documents, and other online platforms for all employees, teachers, and professors. The ministry emphasizes that, under the working-from-home guidelines, employees' office, school, and university attendance should not influence their compensation or their work performance ratings.

On March 24, 2020, the Office of the minister of education and culture released a more comprehensive educational policy to be implemented during the Covid-19 emergency, addressed to all governors and regents, or mayors. This includes the 2020 National Exam, the process of learning from home, the school graduation exam, grade or class advancement, the admission process for new students, and the School Operational Aid Fund or Education Operational Aid. Seen in this progression of the responses by the Ministry of Education and Culture—the impact of the Covid-19 crisis has been dramatic and rapid within educational institutions.

New role of schools and emergent knowledge

During the pandemic, schools and other educational institutions in Indonesia have embraced a new role in educating the school community and the general public about the prevention of transmission and spreading of Covid-19. They have installed billboards, banners, and other kinds of signage at school gates and inserted informational messages during online teaching and learning activities. To aid these efforts, the Ministry of Education and Culture in each province provides materials from a centralized local site. These materials include a guide on the prevention of Covid-19—crafted by the national Ministry of Health, GERMAS (Healthy Life Community Movement Initiative), and the provincial government—and a Ministry of Health document with questions and answers on Covid-19.

The guide, using colored illustrations, provides a detailed definition of Covid-19 and its clinical symptoms. It offers advice on traveling to China and gives instructions on such personal preventive practices as hand washing, mask usage, nutrition and healthy diet, and exercise. It outlines coughing ethics, smoking prohibitions, and prayer, quarantine, and social distancing protocols. The guide also includes contact and information links for call centers in respective provinces. The questions-and-answers document gives frequently asked questions and concise answers on many aspects of Covid-19—its definition, means of infection, virus lifeform, treatment, and risks to various younger populations. It also gives related travel advice and media outlets covering the current situation. In addition to distributing these materials, the ministry asks schools to advise their personnel to stay healthy, maintain cleanliness, practice physical distancing, and limit outside-of-home activities to essentials only.

This new guide is interesting in that it expands the school's role into the sphere of its staff's home life, notably in the areas of personal religious practices of prayer, diet, and healthy and active body discipline. Praying at public schools (not religiously affiliated) is not new, and can be practiced at various times: during the Monday school flag ceremony, for the Zuhur prayer for Muslim students (part of the five times of prayer in a day), usually around noon during the second school recess, at the beginning of classes before the teaching of the first subject, at the end of the class day, and sporadically for several other religious and formal occasions at school. However, due to the Covid-19 crisis, the school encourages a prayer practice that seems to be a part of a personal and family health lifestyle, as a means of protecting people from the coronavirus and maintaining mental health.

In terms of diet, the schools lay out a detailed configuration of what a nutritious meal looks like during the pandemic. In one of the illustrations disseminated in schools, a healthy meal is pictured as a plate with rice, protein choices, vegetables, and a side of fruits and drinks. In the guidebook, dietary measures include diverse foods options: a lot of vegetables and fruits; a high level of many healthy protein options; good carbohydrates; limitations on sweet, salty, and fattening foods; a habit of having breakfast and drinking water—all paired with regular exercise and maintaining a healthy weight. The guidebook states that these measures will ensure a healthy generation for the country.

Beyond the healthy lifestyle practices mentioned above, schools' efforts to defeat Covid-19 are put into a moral framework. As shown in the archival texts for the study, the Central Java Provincial Government calls these efforts a "moral movement to save the children of the nation". The government places schools at the forefront of this movement, bringing in their immediate neighborhood and local communities to take part as well.

Critical need for refocusing curriculum

The Covid-19 crisis has triggered the need to refocus the education curriculum. Due to the risk of viral spreading, there are restrictions on gathering in large numbers within a school building or classroom. As shown in the formal announcement letter by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Office of Education and Culture on the provincial level, schools must hold their teaching and learning activities online. The ministry emphasizes in their directives to the schools that online at-home instruction is to provide students with a meaningful learning experience, without the traditional pressure to complete school curriculum prepared for grade advancement and graduation, and that teaching during the pandemic is to be adapted according to student ability. The Directorate General of Teachers and Education Personnel, under Ministry of Education and Culture, whose work is to craft

and implement policies surrounding guidance for teachers, and education personnel (mentioned in Sekretariat GTK 2020) emphasizes that such adaption of the curriculum is more important than the completion of the curriculum. The school curriculum is contextualized as coming from both students and teachers, relating to students' needs, and adapted according to the situations and locales of students and teachers. Further, teachers are to focus meaningful learning experiences on the gaining of life skills such as those relevant to the Covid-19 pandemic. Several teachers shared various lessons in the repository collection during the pandemic—giving such online class assignments as creating a poster to educate the public about the pandemic, creating comics about prevention of Covid-19, or researching Covid-19 and writing reports on it to be shared in class.

The teachers can vary activities and assignments within Learning at Home among students, according to their interests and individual circumstances—including considerations about access or Learning at Home facilities. The provincial offices' archive reemphasizes that online learning is to be done creatively, to be fun but also challenging, to train independence, not to cause worry or panic, and not to burden the students or their parents/guardians, so that the spread of Covid-19 can be prevented. As a result, this Learning at Home initiative also trusts teachers to provide qualitative and meaningful feedback and assessment, without the confinements of quantitative assessment formats. Here, the school curriculum becomes more responsive and proactive to the need for timely topics.

The Ministry of Education and Culture also released the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) program, which principally provides the space for schools, headmasters, and teachers to offer innovative learning activities according to their situation. In this program, teachers can choose basic competencies and essential materials for their teaching during the pandemic. This program expands activities not just through online learning but also into offline learning, such as options for learning at the students' homes—thus taking advantage of created-learning television programs and radio broadcasts, and learning materials available in the students' surroundings, in addition to the home use of students' textbooks, which were previously only available for use inside the school building. This variety of learning programs is also an effort to reach areas in the archipelago that still face challenges around Internet access needed for online learning.

In addition, in August 2020, the minister of education and culture gave elementary and secondary schools three options for their schools' curriculum adaptation route during this pandemic, in order to mitigate the challenges faced by the Learning at Home initiative due to Covid-19. The first is to keep using the 2013 National Curriculum; the second, use the school's emergency curriculum; and the third, use the school's independent, simplified curriculum. The minister mentioned that these options also benefit teachers as they are given flexibility to apply a simplified curriculum, reducing their teaching load to refocus educational activities on essential and contextual learning in a way that can also improve teacher psychological well-being. Concomitantly, students are not burdened with the demand to complete the whole pre-pandemic school curriculum and would be able to refocus their learning on educational experiences that are essential and contextual while also improving their psychological well-being. Parents are also considered within these curricular options. The ministry hopes that curricular flexibility will assist parents in helping their children and navigating the challenges of supporting their children in Learning at Home during the pandemic.

The school emergency curriculum—the second option noted above—reduces the number of basic competencies that students need to achieve under the normal 2013 national curriculum. In elementary schools, the emergency curriculum focuses on literacy and numeric competencies derived from multiple subjects in the elementary education. Using

an emergency curriculum, schools themselves create the school-based assessment used to determine if a student passes and can go to the next grade. Primarily, within the emergency curriculum, assessment has to accommodate issues surrounding access, available learning and assessment facility, and family support diversity, to name a few. Schools are, ideally, to give these assessments multiple times. Some assessment examples that the ministry gave in the archival texts include both cognitive and noncognitive aspects. That is, they consider students' psychological, social, and emotional conditions—for example, asking students to describe, in a short-story format, their experiences learning at home.

The ministry provides the detailed list of competencies, which include four components of essential competency—spiritual attitude, social attitude, knowledge, and skills— and more detailed basic competencies in each of the components mentioned for each school level. For the elementary education level, these competencies are elaborated in such subjects as Indonesian, math, religious education (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, Khonghucu, Christianity), natural science, social science, health, sports, physical education, civic and *Pancasila* education, and arts and crafts. For the junior secondary education level, they are developed in the same subjects, plus English and information systems. And for the senior secondary education level, they are particularized in similar subjects, in addition to anthropology, language and literature (Arabic, Japanese, German, Korean, Mandarin, Indonesian, English), biology, economics, physics, geography, chemistry, arts and culture, and sociology. Under the new school emergency curriculum, each subject has fewer basic competencies to be achieved, which also allows reduction of teachers' workload. This reduction is aimed at refocusing the teachers' energy to provide more meaningful and interactive learning to students during the pandemic.

Educational-technology responsiveness and nurturing home character education

To support online learning during the pandemic, the ministry provides free additional electronic learning materials, which include reading materials, activity sheets, and group activities for all students and teachers in early childhood grades through high school. These materials—which include various textbooks in student and teacher versions, at all grade levels—are created by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and supplemented by others assembled by UNICEF-Indonesia in collaboration with several educational organizations in Indonesia (known as the National Secretariat of Saving from Disaster Education). Within the online Learning at Home initiative, schools that are not able to do live streaming or live videoconferencing achieve most teacher-student interaction using the *WhatsApp* smartphone application. Homework and assignments are delivered via messages and file attachments. In this context, the ministry's electronic materials are very practical and useful in supporting remote learning activities.

As part of the curriculum response to the health crisis, the Ministry of Education and Culture has created a free online application and television program for learning. Each province in Indonesia has its own limitations regarding technological infrastructure available to support the processes of at-home learning. Some of the significant challenges often mentioned in the archival texts are the provision of electricity, Internet connection or Internet data packets, and technological and communication equipment such as smartphones and computers. As Internet connection is not equally distributed in all parts of Indonesia and also varies across families, the ministry has to think creatively in implementing its

online learning initiative. To be able to reach out to school populations who have limited Internet connection or Internet data facility, the ministry created the *Learning from Home* program on one of the National Television stations, TVRI. This program serves as alternative learning material during the pandemic, making sure that more of the population has the opportunity for formal learning at home. Along with the program itself, the ministry also provides a weekly survey for teachers, parents, and students to evaluate the program and its materials, helping to shape changes and development of material and delivery.

The program's weekly schedule: Monday–Friday, 8:00–8:30 a.m., early childhood education; 8:30–09:00 a.m., grades one through three; 9:00–9:30 a.m., grades four to six; 9:30–10:00 a.m., junior secondary; 10:00–10:30 a.m., senior secondary; 10:30–11:00 a.m., child-rearing and education; 7:00–11:30 p.m., Indonesian film program. On Saturdays and Sundays, 8:00 a.m.–11:30 p.m., there is cultural programming and Indonesian films for families.

The intention of these television learning programs is not to support the completion of the school curriculum. Rather, it is to emphasize literacy and numeric competency, to nurture emotional well-being and closeness in the family, and to provide positive character education manifested through the activities presented on television.

Along with the television programs, the ministry also provides a weekly program guide for parents and students. The early childhood education program guide consists of activities that parents can practice before, during, and after the program. These include sitting together enjoying the program with their children; explaining what the program is about and how long the program is; discussing the characters; inviting children to follow the TV characters' movements; singing together; talking together about topics in the program; role playing as well as reading more stories from the program; drawing from the story in the program; creating collages and documenting activities or doing other activities shown in the program. The guide encourages parents to carry out the activities with excitement—ensuring children's happiness, feelings of ease and not burden, closeness, and good communication—while inserting moral values. Through the guide's detailed suggestions, responses to the curriculum in the TV programming nurtures character education.

For the programs intended for elementary school through senior secondary school students, guides for activities or actions that parents and students can participate in are also provided. Activities for parents are geared toward ensuring the improvement of their children's literacy and numeric competency. Examples of these activities are observing, discussing, motivating, mentoring, guiding, recognizing children's accomplishments, and even communicating and discussing with their children's teachers when they need further assistance. A guide for students also lists activities to help them improve their literacy and numeric competency, such as including preparing paper, pens/pencils, notebook before the program, practicing close listening, completing the programs' assignments, using other sources to help complete the assignment, taking notes to be able to discuss further with parents or teachers, and asking guidance from parents or siblings related to the programs' materials or topics. There is also a list of open and narrated questions for each program, along with screen shots of parts of the program. What is also interesting is the programming and guide include a section on parenting. This section has videos from experts with tips on teaching a variety of topics to children, such as life skills and independence, and on creating quality time with family, with specific suggestions and advice on parents' work and family-time management, on what content not to watch with children, on bullying and violence prevention, and on nurturing family relationships.

In addition to the television program effort, the ministry engages several other new ways to develop initiatives and work in close collaboration with educational-technology

sectors. *Rumah Belajar* is a free online learning application that the ministry developed to provide learning materials and a communication platform to share with teachers all over Indonesia. Currently (October 2020) more than 260,000 teachers and 640,000 students have used the application. Further, multiple telecommunication providers collaborate with the ministry to provide the students and teachers free access to Internet data when using *Rumah Belajar* or other online learning applications in Indonesia. Starting from September 2020 through December 2020, to support the Learning at Home initiative the Ministry of Education and Culture is working with the Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises, the Committee of Covid-19 Management and National Economy Recovery, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, and several cellular operators to provide an Internet quota subsidy for both students and teachers at all levels, from early childhood education through higher education. This data subsidy can be used to access many applications, videoconference tools, educational websites, and campus websites. This increase of access equity is part of a long-term plan to widen access to the Internet and improve Internet speed and infrastructure across villages and public spaces as well as to reorganize and add to the radio-frequency spectrum throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 crisis affects educational systems, activities, policies, and practices in Indonesia. The archives analyzed for this study—originating from the office of the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, the Provincial Education Department, and local schools—show various and complex curricular responsiveness during the pandemic. The archives articulate, in detail, the response of the Ministry of Education and Culture to the crisis, demonstrating shifts across the organization and practice of formal schooling; especially, changes in instructional practices, classrooms, and the culture of teaching. The Covid-19 crisis shapes the new role of schools and emergent knowledge in schools, provoking a critical need for refocusing curriculum and practicing meaningful assessment, while helping educators, policy-makers, and practitioners to imagine and build creative education-technology responsiveness and to nurture home character education.

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