



Strategies of Islamic Education Teachers in Creating an Inclusive and Child-Friendly Learning Environment: A Case Study at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to explore the strategies of Islamic Religious Education teachers in creating inclusive and child-friendly learning environments at Imelda Health Vocational School, Medan. The research is grounded in the challenges of student heterogeneity at the vocational level, which requires teachers to adopt adaptive, humanistic, and contextual strategies.

Methodology: The research employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. Data were collected through direct observation of the learning process, in-depth interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers, students, and the principal, as well as documentation of syllabi, lesson plans, and relevant school policies. Data analysis applied an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The validity of the data was ensured through source and method triangulation.

Main Findings: The findings reveal that Islamic Religious Education teachers integrate inclusive values through collaborative teaching methods, contextualization of subject matter with the field of health, and the use of simple technologies. Teachers also act as agents of transformation by fostering empathy, building student self-confidence, and cultivating child-friendly classroom environments. Institutional support strengthens these strategies, ensuring that Islamic Religious Education goes beyond cognitive aspects to include spiritual, social, and professional character development.

Novelty/Originality of this study: The study underscores the significance of Islamic Religious Education as a medium for strengthening humanitarian values in vocational education. It demonstrates how inclusive strategies can transform learning spaces into holistic environments that shape students' intellectual competence and moral identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education is not only oriented toward shaping students who are spiritually obedient [1], but also serves to instill the values of humanity, tolerance, and respect for diversity [2]. Within the context of vocational secondary education, particularly in Health Vocational High Schools, the challenges of teaching Islamic Religious Education become increasingly complex. These challenges are influenced by the heterogeneous backgrounds of students, including differences in academic ability, socio-cultural conditions, and psychological

characteristics. Consequently, Islamic Religious Education teachers must develop teaching strategies that are inclusive, adaptive, and child-friendly.

The role of Islamic Religious Education teachers is strategically important in shaping students' spiritual character, ethics, and social competence [3]. As agents of change, they are required not only to master religious content [4], but also to adapt to technological developments [5], the distinctive characteristics of vocational students, and the demand for a more contextual learning approach [6]. The central challenge lies in integrating the principles of inclusive and child-friendly education into the Islamic Religious Education learning process [7].

The concept of inclusive education emphasizes that every student, including those with special needs, has the right to quality education without discrimination [8]. In practice, inclusivity is not limited to integrating students with special needs into regular classes [9], but also involves providing equal opportunities for development through adaptive curricula, individual and group support, and a learning climate that encourages participation from all students [10]. Moreover, inclusive education represents a paradigm shift in how education is perceived [11], valuing diversity as an asset in the learning process [12].

Although the discourse on inclusive education has been introduced in Indonesia for some time, its implementation in Islamic Religious Education learning at vocational schools still faces several obstacles. Previous studies highlight constraints such as limited teacher readiness, insufficient supporting facilities, and low awareness and engagement among stakeholders [13], [14]. As a result, the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in creating an inclusive and child-friendly learning environment has not yet been fully optimized.

Furthermore, developments in educational theory, such as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, emphasize the importance of social interaction in learning [15], while constructivist theory asserts that students construct knowledge through meaningful experiences [16], [17]. These theoretical foundations are highly relevant for Islamic Religious Education teachers in designing humanistic, collaborative, and contextual learning strategies [18]. Therefore, inclusive and child-friendly Islamic Religious Education learning aligns with modern pedagogical principles and upholds the mandate of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which emphasizes the right to safe and non-discriminatory education [19].

However, a research gap remains because most previous studies have focused on inclusive education within primary and general education contexts, while specific studies on Islamic Religious Education teacher strategies in vocational schools particularly health vocational schools are still limited. In vocational contexts such as health schools, competencies such as empathy, cooperation, and social awareness are essential aspects that must be nurtured early. Thus, this study is expected to contribute theoretically and practically to the development of inclusive, adaptive, and child rights-oriented Islamic Religious Education learning strategies in vocational high schools. In addition to strengthening the literature on inclusive education in a vocational context, the results of this study are also expected to serve as a reference for teachers and policymakers in creating a more humanistic and responsive learning space for diverse students.

The purpose of this research is to analyze and describe the strategies employed by Islamic Education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan in developing an inclusive and child-friendly learning environment. This study is important because it provides an in-depth understanding of how Islamic education can serve as a transformative force in promoting tolerance, empathy, and equality within a vocational learning setting. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the theoretical enrichment of inclusive Islamic education and offer practical guidance for educators in designing inclusive pedagogical approaches.

Based on this background, the research problem can be formulated as follows: How do Islamic Education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan implement strategies to create an inclusive and child-friendly learning environment? The objective of this study is to identify, analyze, and explain the strategies used by Islamic Religious Education teachers to promote inclusivity and child-friendly practices in vocational education settings.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at exploring in depth the strategies of Islamic Religious Education teachers in creating an inclusive and child-friendly learning environment at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows a comprehensive understanding of social phenomena by examining the interactions, experiences, and meanings that emerge naturally in the educational setting. Using a case study design, this research sought to investigate how Islamic Religious Education teachers plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive learning practices that accommodate student diversity in vocational education.

The population in this study consisted of Islamic Religious Education teachers, students, and the principal of Imelda Health Vocational School. Samples were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience and understanding of inclusive education practices. The sample included two Islamic Religious Education teachers, six students representing different grades, and the school principal, all of whom were directly involved in the learning process.

The research instruments used in this study consisted of observation guidelines, interview protocols, and documentation checklists. All instruments were designed by the researcher based on theories of inclusive education and child-friendly learning. To ensure their validity, the instruments were reviewed and validated by two experts in Islamic education and qualitative research methodology. Their suggestions were used to improve the clarity and content accuracy of each item. Furthermore, the instruments were pre-tested to confirm that they effectively captured the intended information.

Data were collected through direct classroom observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Observations were conducted to obtain a real picture of teacher-student interactions, while interviews explored participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections on inclusive and child-friendly education. Documentation, such as syllabi, lesson plans, and school policy documents, was analyzed to strengthen the empirical findings. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by detailed field notes to capture contextual nuances.

The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model [20], which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and focusing on information relevant to the research objectives, while data display was carried out in narrative and thematic form to identify patterns and relationships among the findings. Conclusions were drawn by interpreting recurring themes and verifying them through triangulation to ensure consistency and reliability. Triangulation of sources (teachers, students, and principal) and methods (observation, interview, and documentation) was applied to enhance the credibility of the data.

The research procedure was carried out in several stages, including preliminary coordination with the school, preparation of instruments, data collection, analysis, and report writing. Throughout the process, ethical research principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were upheld. The findings from this study are expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic Religious Education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School develop and implement inclusive and child-friendly learning strategies that align with students' academic and social needs.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Integration of Inclusive Values in Islamic Education Teaching Strategies at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan

The integration of inclusive values in Islamic Religious Education at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan represents an essential pedagogical shift that aligns religious education with humanistic and child-centered approaches. Given that students come from diverse socio-cultural and academic backgrounds, inclusive strategies are not merely complementary but form the foundation for effective religious instruction. Within the context of health vocational education, Islamic education teachers are expected to transcend the traditional emphasis on doctrinal understanding by fostering empathy, justice, and respect for diversity [21]. This finding supports previous research indicating that inclusive Islamic education plays a vital role in developing social sensitivity and moral awareness among students from plural backgrounds [22].

The results of this study reveal that Islamic education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School apply inclusive teaching strategies grounded in the belief that each student has unique potential. Through curriculum adaptation and varied instructional methods, teachers ensure that no learner is excluded from classroom participation. Group discussions and peer mentoring are among the dominant strategies used. High-achieving students often assist their peers who struggle with complex material, creating a collaborative atmosphere that nurtures solidarity and shared responsibility. This pattern is consistent with the findings of Wentzel and Watkins, who demonstrated that peer collaboration fosters both cognitive and affective growth in inclusive classrooms [23]. However, this study contributes new evidence by showing that such strategies are particularly effective [24], in vocational education contexts, where cooperation and empathy are critical components of professional competence.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes social interaction as the driver of cognitive development, provides a strong theoretical foundation for these practices. Islamic education teachers apply this principle by designing learning activities that encourage dialogical engagement, such as ethical case studies and moral-decision simulations related to healthcare services. This supports the argument [25], who found that interactive and context-based religious instruction strengthens students' moral reasoning and emotional intelligence. By engaging students in collaborative moral reflection, the Islamic education learning process not only builds knowledge but also cultivates emotional maturity and social awareness two essential aspects of inclusive education.

Inclusive learning in Islamic education also considers psychological diversity among students. Some students tend to be introverted, while others are more outspoken; therefore, teachers consciously design classroom climates that encourage balanced participation. A safe, respectful, and non-judgmental atmosphere allows students

to express their views freely and develop self-confidence. This finding echoes the work of Al-Zoubi [25], who emphasized that child-friendly classrooms enhance students' socio-emotional well-being and learning motivation.

Technological innovation further strengthens inclusive learning implementation. Teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School have adopted online platforms and interactive media to accommodate different learning styles—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Which found that digital tools help bridge learning disparities by providing flexible, student-centered instruction [26]. Such technological integration demonstrates that inclusivity extends beyond acceptance of diversity to ensuring equitable access to educational resources.

Contextualization of learning materials is another important strategy identified in this study. Teachers connect Islamic principles with real-world vocational practices, such as linking the concept of *ta'awun* (mutual assistance) to teamwork in patient care. This approach helps students recognize the practical relevance of religious values and fosters a sense of social responsibility. Islamic education enhances student engagement and moral internalization [27]. What distinguishes this study is its focus on health-related vocational education, highlighting how inclusivity and professional ethics intersect in shaping empathetic future healthcare workers.

Tolerance and respect for diversity are further cultivated through cross-class collaborative discussions on current socio-religious and cultural issues. Students learn to perceive diversity not as a source of division but as enrichment for collective learning. This is consistent with the principle of inclusive pedagogy, which views diversity as an educational asset rather than a challenge [28].

Despite these achievements, several obstacles were identified, including limited classroom facilities and instructional media. Teachers often cope with a shortage of projectors and inadequate learning spaces by creatively adapting available resources. Infrastructural limitations are among the main barriers to inclusive education in Indonesia. Nevertheless, this study highlights that teacher innovation and school policy support can effectively mitigate such constraints [29].

The interviews reinforce these findings. A islamic education teacher stated, *"We try to emphasize to students that learning religion is not just about memorizing verses or fiqh laws, but also about how they can behave fairly and respect their friends. For example, in group discussions, I always arrange for the more knowledgeable students to help their peers. That way, all students feel involved. For me, that is part of child-friendly inclusive learning"* (Interview, August 2025).

Similarly, an eleventh-grade student shared, *"I'm happy when islamic education lessons are done in groups. Sometimes I find it difficult to understand the lesson, but my friends help explain it to me. The teacher also always gives me the opportunity to speak, even though I am a bit shy. That makes me feel valued"* (Interview, August 2025). Meanwhile, the principal remarked, *"We fully support islamic education teachers in developing child-friendly and inclusive learning methods. Despite limited facilities, I see the creativity of teachers in utilizing simple but effective media. We also encourage special training so that teachers are better prepared to deal with student diversity"* (Interview, September 2025). These testimonies indicate a coherent pattern of collaboration between teachers, students, and administrators, reinforcing the collective effort toward inclusivity.

Overall, the integration of inclusive values in islamic education learning at Imelda Health Vocational School signifies a transformative pedagogical practice. It redefines Islamic education as a medium for cultivating humanistic, empathetic, and socially responsible individuals, consistent with global educational goals for inclusivity. This study supports earlier findings on inclusive Islamic pedagogy [30], while offering new insights into its application within the vocational education context. The results demonstrate that inclusive religious teaching can simultaneously enhance moral development, professional ethics, and psychological well-being among students.

Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations: Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on inclusive religious education by positioning it as an integral part of vocational pedagogy. Practically, it offers an implementable model for teachers to integrate inclusivity through curriculum adaptation, peer collaboration, and technology use. However, the study is limited by its single-case design, which may restrict the generalization of findings to other institutions. Future research should employ multi-site comparative studies across different vocational schools and include quantitative assessments of learning outcomes to strengthen the evidence base. Expanding the scope to explore students' long-term attitudinal changes toward inclusivity would also contribute valuable insights for the development of inclusive Islamic education in Indonesia and beyond.

3.2. The Role of Islamic Education Teachers as Agents of Transformation Towards a Child-Friendly Learning Environment

Islamic Education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan play a dual role as both educators and agents of social transformation. As educators, they are responsible for delivering religious material in accordance with the curriculum. However, as transformative agents, they must go beyond conventional instruction by creating a learning environment that is child-friendly, inclusive, and grounded in human values. This role requires creativity, empathy, and adaptability to educational changes, particularly the integration of digital learning tools that meet the expectations and learning habits of contemporary students. The findings of this study indicate that islamic education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School have successfully combined

pedagogical professionalism with a humanistic mission, thus transforming Islamic education into a dynamic space for moral and emotional development.

A child-friendly learning environment, as promoted by UNICEF and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, emphasizes safety, non-discrimination, and respect for students' rights [31]. In this regard, Islamic education teachers act as facilitators who bridge the communication gap between teachers and students. By applying persuasive and empathetic communication, teachers cultivate classrooms that nurture both cognitive understanding and emotional well-being. This finding resonates with the work of Pujianti and Nugraha [32], who emphasized that religious education should foster an affective and participatory climate to support character formation. In the context of health vocational education, where future careers involve care and empathy, this child-friendly orientation becomes even more crucial.

The concept of child-friendliness in Islamic education instruction aligns with CRC principles, which advocate for safe, participatory, and inclusive education [33]. At Imelda Health Vocational School, Islamic education teachers contextualize religious teachings to reflect the ethical demands of the health profession. For instance, during lessons on morality, teachers link religious principles to the ethics of patient care, confidentiality, and equality in service. This contextualization makes Islamic teachings more relatable and meaningful, as students can apply them in their daily and future professional lives. These findings are consistent with those of Qodim [34], who asserted that contextual religious learning increases students' moral awareness and internalization of values. The present study, however, contributes a new dimension by highlighting how these values operate in vocational health education, where ethical behavior and empathy are fundamental to professional practice.

In implementing inclusive and child-friendly strategies, Islamic education teachers also prioritize student participation. They employ dialogical and participatory learning methods such as role play, reflective discussion, and case studies that provide all students regardless of background or ability an equal chance to contribute. This finding supports the research of Yunan [35], who found that participatory approaches enhance student engagement and moral sensitivity. Through these interactive methods, students are not merely recipients of knowledge but co-constructors of meaning, aligning with constructivist and humanistic pedagogical theories.

The humanistic dimension of Islamic education learning is reinforced through the teachers' role modeling. Rather than functioning solely as transmitters of knowledge, Islamic education teachers embody the ethical and spiritual values they teach. Their patience, fairness, and openness serve as living examples for students, confirming Bandura's social learning theory that students learn moral behavior more effectively through modeling than through verbal instruction [36]. As a result, students develop an understanding that Islamic ethics are not abstract ideals but practical guidelines for conduct.

While limited facilities remain a challenge, Islamic education teachers demonstrate innovation in overcoming resource constraints. They employ creative media such as storytelling, educational games, and improvisational role-playing to sustain student engagement. This finding parallels that of Navaro, who noted that teachers' creativity can compensate for infrastructural limitations in developing inclusive and enjoyable learning. Thus, the findings reaffirm that the success of a child-friendly environment depends not on physical resources but on pedagogical innovation and commitment [37].

Effective classroom management is another important aspect of child-friendly education. Islamic education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School apply a positive discipline approach that emphasizes encouragement, reflection, and appreciation instead of punishment. This method builds mutual respect and self-confidence while fostering intrinsic motivation. It also aligns with the constructivist approach, which maintains that meaningful learning occurs when students are given autonomy and trust to explore ideas within a supportive environment [38].

The teachers' transformative role extends beyond the academic sphere into social and emotional mentoring. Many students approach their Islamic education teachers for personal or academic guidance, positioning teachers as informal counselors. One Islamic education teacher explained, *"We strive to make Islamic Education classes a safe and enjoyable space. Children are invited to discuss, not just listen to lectures. For example, when discussing work ethics, I ask them to share their experiences of field work at clinics. This makes them feel valued, while also connecting religious material to the real world"* (Interview, July 2025). This testimony illustrates the teacher's role as a facilitator who fosters trust, dialogue, and experiential learning—key elements of a child-friendly educational culture.

Student perspectives reinforce this finding. A twelfth-grade student stated, *"I feel more comfortable in Islamic education lessons because the teacher always listens to our opinions. Even if someone has a different opinion, the teacher does not immediately blame them, but explains patiently. That makes me dare to speak up and not be afraid of being wrong"* (Interview, August 2025). This statement demonstrates that teachers' empathy and dialogical approach strengthen students' confidence and participation. The principal also highlighted the institutional dimension of this transformation, noting, *"The Islamic education teachers here play a very important role in creating a child-friendly school culture. They actively engage students in dialogue, and this has a positive impact on the overall classroom atmosphere. The school certainly supports this by providing training and opportunities for teachers to develop inclusive learning methods"* (Interview, September 2025). These consistent

perspectives indicate that sustainable transformation toward inclusivity requires synergy between teachers, students, and institutional leadership.

Overall, the findings confirm that islamic education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School have effectively internalized child-friendly and inclusive education principles within their teaching practice. This outcome supports previous studies emphasizing the centrality of teachers as change agents in moral and inclusive education, while contributing new insight into their role within vocational institutions. The transformative impact observed here demonstrates that religious education can serve as a medium for character formation, social responsibility, and professional ethics development in health-related vocational settings.

This study suggests that when Islamic education teachers act as facilitators and moral exemplars, they become catalysts for institutional transformation. Their efforts prove that inclusive, child-friendly education can be effectively implemented even in resource-limited environments. Theoretically, this research broadens the understanding of islamic education teachers' transformative role by linking religious pedagogy with inclusive and humanistic frameworks. Practically, it highlights actionable models for teacher development, emphasizing empathy, dialogue, and reflective learning as core strategies. However, the study's qualitative case design limits its generalizability. Future research should include cross-institutional comparative analyses and longitudinal studies to examine how child-friendly pedagogies influence students' long-term professional and moral competencies. Furthermore, experimental or mixed-method approaches could be applied to measure the quantifiable effects of these pedagogical innovations on student engagement and character formation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze and describe the strategies used by Islamic Religious Education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan in developing an inclusive and child-friendly learning environment. The findings clearly demonstrate that islamic education teachers play a central role as both educators and agents of transformation who integrate inclusive values into daily learning practices. Through adaptive curriculum design, participatory teaching methods, and contextual religious instruction, teachers successfully create an environment that respects student diversity, promotes empathy, and ensures equal opportunities for learning. These strategies directly address the research objective of identifying how inclusivity and child-friendliness are implemented within Islamic education at the vocational level.

The integration of inclusive principles is evident in various aspects of teaching, including group collaboration, differentiated instruction, and the use of digital learning media. By linking Islamic teachings to real-life professional contexts such as teamwork, ethics, and empathy in patient care teachers make religious values tangible and relevant. These findings align with sociocultural and constructivist learning theories, confirming that interaction and contextual experience are key drivers of moral and cognitive growth. Moreover, the study found that inclusive islamic education learning enhances students' confidence, participation, and sense of belonging, thereby fulfilling the goal of creating a child-friendly educational climate.

The role of islamic education teachers as agents of transformation is also reflected in their capacity to embody humanistic and moral values, functioning not only as instructors but also as role models and counselors. Their empathetic communication and equitable classroom management foster a safe, non-discriminatory learning space consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Despite challenges such as limited facilities, teachers demonstrate innovation through storytelling, reflective discussions, and creative media use. These findings answer the research problem by proving that the success of inclusive and child-friendly Islamic education depends not on material resources but on teachers' pedagogical commitment and adaptability.

In general, this study contributes to the broader understanding of Islamic education as a transformative force capable of promoting inclusivity, equality, and empathy in vocational learning environments. The results support previous studies on inclusive religious pedagogy while introducing new insights into its implementation within health-oriented vocational education. Theoretically, the study reinforces the connection between Islamic pedagogy, inclusive education, and humanistic learning models. Practically, it provides a replicable framework for teachers and policymakers to strengthen inclusive and child-friendly practices in Islamic education.

The implications of this research emphasize the importance of professional development programs for Islamic education teachers that focus on inclusive teaching methods, classroom dialogue, and contextual learning. Institutional support from school administrators and education authorities is also essential to sustain these practices. However, as this research was limited to a single case study, future studies should expand to multiple institutions and employ mixed-method approaches to examine how inclusive islamic education strategies influence students' long-term academic and moral development.

In conclusion, the study confirms that Islamic Education teachers at Imelda Health Vocational School in Medan have successfully implemented inclusive and child-friendly learning strategies that foster both intellectual and moral growth. Their role as agents of transformation illustrates that religious education, when practiced inclusively and humanely, can serve as a powerful medium for cultivating compassionate, ethical, and socially responsible young professionals prepared to contribute positively to society.

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