

Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Strategies in Building an Inclusive and Child-Friendly Learning Environment at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering an inclusive and child-friendly learning environment at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai. The background of this research is rooted in the challenges of 21st-century education, which demand that teachers embrace student diversity in terms of religion, culture, and social background. The study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with PAI teachers, classroom observations, and documentation of learning activities conducted from late June to early August 2025. The findings reveal that PAI teachers' strategies are manifested in two main aspects: the integration of Islamic values into inclusive pedagogical practices and the implementation of school-based cleanliness and greening programs as forms of environmentally friendly character education. These strategies contribute to creating a learning atmosphere that is comfortable, equitable, and supportive of active student participation. This research offers significant contributions to the development of Islamic religious education practices that are relevant to contemporary student needs.

Keywords: *PAI Teachers' Strategies; Inclusive; Child-Friendly; SMA Negeri 5 Binjai*

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Introduction

Education in the modern era demands a paradigm shift that emphasizes diversity, openness, and respect for every individual [1]. The concept of inclusivity in education emerges as a response to the need to ensure that all learners, without exception, receive equal rights to education [2]. In Indonesia, national education policies underscore that every child—regardless of cultural, religious, or socio-economic background—must be granted equal access to learning opportunities [3]. This condition places teachers at the forefront of creating learning environments that not only focus on cognitive development but also cultivate a sense of safety, comfort, and child-friendliness for students.

SMA Negeri 5 Binjai, a public high school located in Binjai City, is characterized by student diversity in terms of family background, religion, and academic ability. Such diversity provides great potential for building dynamic learning experiences while simultaneously presenting serious challenges for teachers in ensuring that every student feels accepted and respected. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers hold a strategic role in fostering inclusive and child-friendly learning environments [4], as PAI is not limited to teaching normative aspects of religion but also instills moral, ethical, and social values relevant to daily life [5].

PAI teachers are required to integrate Islamic values [6] into learning processes aligned with inclusive principles [7]. Islam, as a religion that emphasizes *rahmatan lil-'alamin*, provides a strong theological foundation for cultivating tolerance, respect for differences, and the protection of children [8]. These principles serve as a reference for building learning experiences that emphasize not only cognitive aspects but also emotional and spiritual dimensions. Thus, PAI teachers' strategies must address the need for child-friendly learning, ensuring that every student feels valued and included.

Inclusive and child-friendly education is inseparable from efforts to build a healthy school culture [9]. In this regard, PAI teachers at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai play a pivotal role in strengthening values of togetherness, mutual respect, and environmental awareness. Through the use of collaborative learning methods, teachers seek to create classrooms that provide equal opportunities for all students to participate actively [10]. This strategy not only enhances academic understanding but also contributes to shaping students' character, fostering empathy, and promoting care for both social and natural environments.

Previous studies on inclusive education highlight that teachers are the most influential factor in determining the success of implementation. Teachers with a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education philosophy are more likely to create learning environments oriented toward student participation. However, field evidence shows that many teachers still face obstacles in applying inclusive teaching due to limited understanding, methodology, or resources. Therefore, this research is important in uncovering the concrete strategies of PAI teachers in addressing such challenges at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai.

National policies issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology have also emphasized the importance of child-friendly education in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The implementation of these policies requires active teacher engagement to ensure that discrimination, violence, and bullying do not occur in schools. PAI teachers, through spiritual and moral approaches, hold a unique position to instill collective awareness among students regarding the importance of fostering a harmonious learning environment.

SMA Negeri 5 Binjai also provides supporting programs to cultivate inclusive learning environments, including extracurricular activities that involve all students regardless of background. PAI teachers frequently participate in offering moral guidance in such activities, ensuring that education is not confined to the classroom. This reinforces the notion that the role of PAI teachers is multidimensional, spanning intracurricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular domains.

In practice, PAI teachers' strategies include integrating Islamic values with child-friendly active learning methods. Teachers employ dialogical approaches, provide equal opportunities for student expression, and engage students in social and environmental activities. These strategies have proven effective in fostering student self-confidence, reducing discrimination, and strengthening solidarity among learners. In other words, PAI teachers serve as role models in implementing inclusive education grounded in religious values.

This study seeks to fill the gap in research on the practical strategies of PAI teachers in creating inclusive and child-friendly learning environments. Most previous studies have primarily focused on policy aspects or general perspectives on inclusive education, whereas this study emphasizes practical application at the school level. It is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how PAI teachers design, implement, and evaluate inclusive learning strategies at the high school level.

Based on the discussion above, the purpose of this study is to explore the strategies of PAI teachers in fostering inclusive and child-friendly learning environments at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai. The research focuses on two main findings: the integration of Islamic values into inclusive learning practices and the implementation of school cleanliness and greening programs. This study is expected to contribute to the development of Islamic religious education practices that are relevant to the challenges of the 21st century.

Literature Review

Inclusive education is an approach that emphasizes equal learning opportunities for all students without discrimination [11]. This aligns with the concept of child-friendly education, which prioritizes safety, comfort, and support for the optimal development of students' potential [12]. Within the Islamic context, the principle of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* underscores the importance of justice, compassion, and respect for diversity, in line with the ultimate goal of education to form holistic human beings—both as servants of Allah and as stewards (*khalifah*) on earth [13]. Previous studies have highlighted the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in internalizing religious values; however, much of the discourse remains normative and has yet to sufficiently reveal practical strategies in real classroom settings. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a concrete description of the strategies employed by PAI teachers in fostering inclusive and child-friendly learning environments at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach with a field study design. This approach was chosen as it is well-suited for exploring the strategies of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering inclusive learning environments in a deep and contextual manner. The research site was SMA Negeri 5 Binjai, with the primary subjects being PAI teachers actively teaching during the 2024/2025 academic year. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with PAI teachers, direct classroom observations, and documentation of relevant school programs. Secondary data were obtained from school policy documents, syllabi, and records of extracurricular activities.

Interviews were conducted between late June and early August 2025, involving two main sessions with the PAI teachers. Classroom observations were carried out during several PAI lessons to examine how inclusive strategies were implemented in practice. Data analysis followed the stages of reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing as outlined by Miles and Huberman. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (teachers and students), methodological triangulation (interviews, observations, documentation), and member checking with informants to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation [14].

3.1 Integration of Islamic Values in Inclusive Learning at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai

The findings reveal that PAI teachers at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai consistently integrate Islamic values into the development of inclusive learning practices. Teachers emphasized that

the values of justice, compassion, and respect for diversity form the foundation to ensure that every student feels accepted and valued.

In an interview conducted on June 28, 2025, one PAI teacher stated: *“We strive to make every student feel respected, regardless of their background. I always connect lessons on morality with the attitude of appreciating differences and helping one another.”* This statement highlights the teachers’ awareness of the importance of instilling Islamic values in the social life of students.

Among the strategies employed was the formation of heterogeneous learning groups, bringing together students from diverse backgrounds to engage in discussion. This method encouraged healthy interaction, strengthened solidarity, and reduced the potential for discrimination in the classroom. Field observations indicated that students became more open in expressing their opinions.

PAI teachers also emphasized prophetic stories as models of tolerance. For instance, the *Constitution of Medina* was presented as a historical illustration demonstrating Islam’s recognition of social diversity. Through this contextual approach, students learned that differences are a natural reality that must be respected.

Beyond text-based learning, teachers implemented reflective practices by asking students to record their weekly experiences in respecting differences. This activity fostered personal awareness of the importance of tolerance while serving as a tool for character assessment.

Classroom observations showed a more democratic atmosphere. Teachers distributed speaking opportunities fairly, ensuring no student dominated the discussion. This participatory climate provided space for shy students to contribute. Inclusivity was also reflected in formative assessment, where teachers emphasized the learning process rather than outcomes. For example, less active students were given alternative opportunities to express themselves through writing, ensuring that all students felt acknowledged.

PAI teachers further contextualized Islamic values by linking them to contemporary issues relevant to students’ lives, such as bullying, intolerance, and social media behavior. This approach prevented Islamic teachings from appearing abstract, instead rendering them relevant to students’ daily realities. Teachers also demonstrated openness in managing diversity by engaging students in dialogue when conflicts arose, thereby fostering fair and educational conflict resolution.

Through these strategies, the integration of Islamic values has proven effective in shaping a more harmonious learning environment. Students reported feeling safe, respected, and motivated to participate actively. This highlights that Islamic Religious Education is not merely the transmission of religious knowledge but also a deliberate effort to cultivate an inclusive and child-friendly classroom culture.

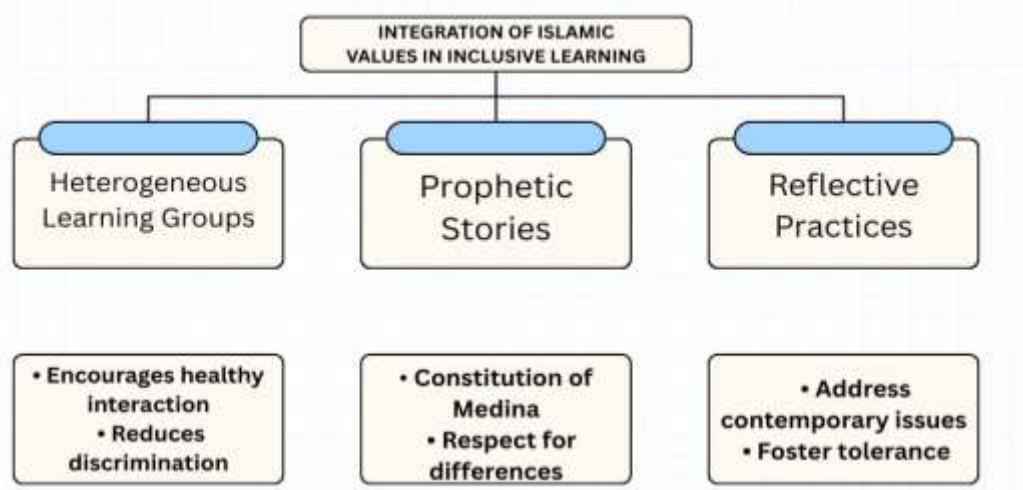


Figure 1. Integration of Islamic Values in Inclusive Learning

3.2 Strategies of PAI Teachers in Inclusive Learning at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai

PAI teachers at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai emphasize that a child-friendly learning environment must be free from intimidation, discrimination, and violence. In an interview conducted on July 5, 2025, one PAI teacher stated: *“The PAI classroom must be a safe place. Children should not be afraid to ask questions or make mistakes, because mistakes are part of the learning process.”* This statement underscores that a sense of safety is the fundamental basis for building a child-friendly learning atmosphere.

One strategy applied was ensuring equal speaking opportunities for all students. The teacher intentionally encouraged quiet students to share their thoughts while moderating dominant students to allow space for others. Observations revealed that this practice made classroom discussions more balanced and inclusive.

The teacher also avoided using language that belittled or cornered students. In an interview on July 12, 2025, the teacher emphasized: *“A teacher’s words are like prayers. If we scold children with harsh words, they may feel small and lose confidence. That’s why I always try to use constructive language.”* This highlights the teacher’s awareness that positive communication greatly influences children’s psychology. A child-friendly environment was also fostered through flexible seating arrangements. The teacher frequently rotated students’ seats to encourage interaction with different peers. This strategy effectively reduced exclusive cliques and broadened social engagement.

In addition, the PAI teacher adopted a personal approach with students facing personal challenges. The teacher often made time after class to listen to students’ concerns. In an interview on July 19, 2025, one student remarked: *“Sir always asks if I look upset. I feel cared for, and it motivates me to participate more in lessons.”* This testimony reflects the presence of a positive emotional bond that nurtures student motivation.

The teacher also ensured that evaluation methods did not create excessive pressure. Emphasis was placed on the learning process rather than solely on outcomes. If students did not meet the required standard, they were given remedial opportunities with additional guidance. This practice fostered self-confidence, as students did not feel permanently labeled as failures.

To address potential bullying, the PAI teacher collaborated with homeroom teachers and school counselors. Observations on July 25, 2025, showed that the teacher consistently reminded students to respect one another, even in casual jokes. *“Humor is fine, but it should never hurt others’ feelings,”* the teacher stressed. This firm stance encouraged students to be more mindful in their interactions.

The teacher also involved students in drafting classroom rules. Through a democratic process, students were asked to contribute ideas about shared behavioral expectations. This involvement gave students a sense of ownership over the rules, making them more disciplined in adhering to them. Child-friendly strategies were not limited to classroom settings but extended to religious activities such as Qur’anic study sessions and Islamic holiday commemorations. The PAI teacher provided students with active roles, such as serving as MCs, reciters of prayers, or program participants. This approach enabled students to engage meaningfully without feeling excluded.

Overall, the strategies of PAI teachers at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai in creating a child-friendly learning environment emphasize safety, positive communication, active participation, and personal attention. These strategies succeeded in fostering a learning atmosphere that was not only academically conducive but also psychologically healthy. This approach aligns with Islamic principles that emphasize compassion and respect for children as the next generation.

Conclusion

The strategies of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SMA Negeri 5 Binjai in fostering inclusive and child-friendly learning environments are manifested through two main approaches: the integration of Islamic values into instruction and the creation of a safe and

participatory classroom atmosphere. The values of justice, compassion, and respect for diversity are implemented through heterogeneous group discussions, self-reflection activities, and prophetic narratives that emphasize tolerance. Meanwhile, a child-friendly environment is cultivated through positive communication, equal opportunities for participation, personal attention to students, and their involvement in classroom rules as well as religious activities. These combined strategies not only strengthen solidarity and a sense of safety in the classroom but also underscore that Islamic Religious Education can serve as an effective instrument for shaping a school culture that is inclusive, humanistic, and responsive to the needs of 21st-century education.

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