Innovative Islamic Religious Education Learning to Enhance Student Learning Engagement at SMP Kemala Bhayangkari 1 Medan

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the forms of innovation in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning, the process of its implementation, and its role in encouraging student learning engagement at SMP Kemala Bhayangkari 1 Medan. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through observations of the learning process, interviews with the IRE teacher and students, and learning documentation. Data analysis involved data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was established through source and technique triangulation. The findings show that IRE learning innovation was implemented through varied learning methods, the use of audiovisual and digital media, group discussions, question-and-answer activities, presentations, and the integration of learning materials with students' everyday experiences. These strategies provided students with greater opportunities to participate through asking questions, answering questions, expressing opinions, engaging in discussions, collaborating, giving presentations, and completing assignments. Student engagement was more evident when learning activities were collaborative and contextual. However, engagement was not yet evenly distributed because some students remained less confident and tended to be passive. Supporting factors included teacher creativity, the availability of learning media, and a conducive learning environment, while limited instructional time, facilities, and differences in student characteristics constituted several obstacles. The study concludes that contextually and participatively designed IRE learning innovations can serve as a strategy for encouraging student learning engagement.

Keywords: learning innovation, Islamic Religious Education, student learning engagement

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Introduction

Learning is a process that aims not only to transmit knowledge but also to encourage students to actively engage in understanding, processing, and applying knowledge. Student learning engagement is reflected in students' involvement in asking questions, participating in discussions, expressing opinions, completing assignments, collaborating, and responding during the learning process. Such engagement encompasses students' behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and initiative-related dimensions in constructing their learning experiences [2], [4]. Active learning has also been shown to produce better learning outcomes than instruction dominated by conventional methods because students are given greater opportunities to think and interact directly with the learning material [3].

The need for learning that can increase student engagement has become increasingly important in Islamic Religious Education (IRE). IRE is not limited to the mastery of religious knowledge but also aims to develop attitudes, character, and behavior consistent with Islamic values. Therefore, IRE learning needs to provide experiences that enable students to connect learning materials with real-life situations, engage in discussions, express opinions, carry out practices, and reflect on the values being learned. The use of innovative learning media and strategies can create IRE learning that is more interactive and engaging for students [6]. Positive teacher support and interaction are also significantly associated with student engagement in learning [5].

In this context, learning innovation is not understood merely as the use of technology, but as teachers' efforts to develop methods, media, activities, and interaction patterns that provide students with greater opportunities to participate. The use of instructional videos, digital media, interactive quizzes, group discussions, problem-based learning, and contextual activities can serve as alternatives to reduce the dominance of one-way instruction. Susanti et al. [6] show that various digital media have been used in IRE learning to make the learning process more interactive, accessible, and engaging. However, their study also indicates the need for field-based research to examine how such innovations are implemented in accordance with actual school conditions.

Normatively, the importance of learning activities and the pursuit of knowledge has a strong foundation in the Qur'an. Allah states in Q.S. Al-'Alaq [96]: 1–5:

اِقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِيْ خَلَقَ

Meaning: "Read in the name of your Lord who created" [1].

The command iqra' can serve as a philosophical foundation for the view that education should encourage individuals to actively read, understand, seek knowledge, and develop their thinking abilities. The principle of active and dialogic learning is also consistent with Q.S. An-Nahl [16]: 125:

اُدْعُ اِلٰى سَبِيْلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِيْ هِيَ اَحْسَنُ

Meaning: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best way" [1].

The verse commands the delivery of teachings through wisdom, good instruction, and dialogue in the best possible manner [1]. This value is relevant to IRE learning that gives students opportunities to ask questions, engage in discussions, express opinions, and understand Islamic teachings contextually.

Although research on IRE learning innovation and the use of digital media has developed considerably, some studies still focus on specific media or strategies separately. Research that specifically describes how IRE learning innovations are implemented within a particular school

context and how their implementation encourages student learning engagement still needs to be strengthened. This condition provides the basis for the present study, entitled "Innovative Islamic Religious Education Learning to Enhance Student Learning Engagement at SMP Kemala Bhayangkari 1 Medan." The study aims to analyze the forms of IRE learning innovation implemented by teachers, the implementation process, and its contribution to student learning engagement. The findings are expected to provide an empirical description of IRE learning innovation practices and serve as input for teachers in creating learning that is more active, interactive, and relevant to students' characteristics.

Literature Review

2.1 Innovation in Islamic Religious Education Learning

Learning innovation is a systematic effort to renew learning strategies, methods, media, and interaction patterns so that learning becomes more effective and responsive to students' needs. In Islamic Religious Education (IRE), innovation is not limited to the use of technology but also includes shifting from teacher-centered instruction toward learning that provides greater opportunities for students to participate, discuss, solve problems, engage in practice, and connect religious content with everyday life. Susanti et al. [6] explain that the use of digital media in IRE can make learning more interactive and engaging, while Mintasih et al. [7] emphasize that the successful integration of technology in IRE is strongly influenced by teachers' competence and their ability to integrate technology with pedagogical strategies.

2.2 Student Learning Engagement

Student learning engagement is a form of student involvement during the learning process that encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Engaged students are not merely physically present in class but demonstrate attention, enthusiasm, willingness to ask questions, ability to express opinions, participation in discussions, completion of assignments, and efforts to understand learning materials in depth [2]. This concept is reinforced by Xu et al. [4], who view student engagement as a multidimensional construct reflecting how students behave, think, feel, and take an active role in the learning process. Thus, student learning engagement can be understood as an important indicator of whether learning genuinely provides students with opportunities to become active subjects of learning.

In IRE learning, student engagement is particularly important because religious content should not be understood solely through memorization but should also be connected to attitudes and behavior. Gea and Novebri [18] found among junior high school students that low engagement in IRE learning can be influenced by internal factors, such as motivation and self-confidence, as well as external factors, such as teaching methods, the learning environment, and limited facilities. The study recommends learning innovations, discussions, and digital media as alternatives for increasing student participation in IRE learning.

2.3 The Relationship between Learning Innovation and Student Learning Engagement

The relationship between learning innovation and student engagement can be explained through the principle of active learning. Active learning provides students with opportunities to engage directly in intellectual and social activities, so that they do not merely receive information from the teacher but also process and use it. Freeman et al. [3], through a meta-analysis of studies in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, found that active learning produces better academic outcomes than traditional instruction. In the context of IRE, the same principle can be applied through discussions, educational games, problem solving, practical activities, projects, interactive quizzes, and digital media that enable students to respond directly.

The teacher's role is a critical component of this relationship. Learning innovation does not automatically increase student engagement if teachers merely replace the media without changing the pattern of classroom interaction. Vargas-Madriz et al. [5], through a meta-analysis of 141 studies involving more than 525,000 students, found a positive association between teacher support and school engagement. The findings indicate that learning environments

characterized by support, feedback, assistance, and positive interpersonal relationships are associated with higher levels of student engagement.

Previous studies show that IRE learning innovation has developed through the use of digital media, interactive learning, and more participatory learning strategies. Susanti et al. [6] emphasize the importance of digital media in IRE learning innovation, while Tarsono et al. [14], through a meta-analysis of 11 studies, found that the use of digital applications in IRE learning improves learning outcomes and offers flexibility and interactivity that can enhance student engagement. Faqihuddin and Muflih [8] and Gea and Novebri [18] show that innovation implementation still faces challenges related to teacher readiness, facilities, teaching methods, student motivation, and self-confidence.

Based on these studies, a research gap remains concerning the context and process of implementing IRE learning innovations in relation to student learning engagement at the junior high school level. Previous studies have tended to examine the effectiveness of specific media or identify technology use in general, whereas research that specifically analyzes the forms of innovation used by teachers, the implementation process, student responses, and supporting and inhibiting factors within a particular school context still needs to be strengthened. This study positions SMP Kemala Bhayangkari 1 Medan as an empirical context for examining the relationship between IRE learning practices and student learning engagement. The study's position lies in understanding innovation not merely as the use of media, but as a change in students' learning experiences involving teaching strategies, student activities, classroom interaction, and the learning environment.

Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was selected because the study aimed to obtain an in-depth description of the forms of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning innovation, its implementation process, and the forms of student engagement during learning. Qualitative research enables researchers to understand phenomena under natural conditions by positioning informants' experiences, actions, interactions, and perspectives as primary sources of data [19]. The study was conducted at SMP Kemala Bhayangkari 1 Medan, with participants selected purposively based on their direct involvement in IRE learning, namely the IRE teacher and students participating in the learning process.

The research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through observations of IRE learning, interviews with the IRE teacher and students, and learning documentation. Observations were conducted to identify the innovations used by the teacher, classroom interaction patterns, the use of methods and media, and forms of student engagement, such as asking questions, answering questions, participating in discussions, expressing opinions, collaborating, completing assignments, and demonstrating enthusiasm during learning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain information about learning innovation planning, reasons for selecting particular methods or media, teachers' experiences in implementing them, student responses, and supporting and inhibiting factors. Secondary data were obtained from documentation such as teaching modules, lesson plans and other learning documents, teaching materials, learning media, photographs of activities, and other documents relevant to the research focus.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of three main activities: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data condensation, the researcher selected, focused, categorized, and simplified observations, interview results, and documentation according to the research focus. The data were then presented in narrative form and thematic categories, including forms of IRE learning innovation, teacher strategies, forms of student engagement, student responses, and supporting and inhibiting factors. The final stage involved identifying patterns and relationships among findings and verifying the conclusions against the overall body of data [20].

Results

4.1 Innovation in Islamic Religious Education Learning

The findings show that IRE learning at SMP Kemala Bhayangkari 1 Medan has been directed toward the use of more varied learning strategies. The teacher does not rely solely on lectures to deliver the material but combines them with question-and-answer activities, group discussions, presentations, assignments, practical activities, and digital learning media. These variations are adapted to the characteristics of the learning materials and students' conditions so that the learning process does not become monotonous. Based on an interview with the IRE teacher, the use of varied methods is motivated by differences in students' characteristics and levels of engagement. The teacher explained that learning should not rely solely on lectures because some students tend to lose attention when they only listen to explanations for an extended period. Therefore, the teacher provides opportunities for students to discuss, express opinions, give presentations, and complete tasks collaboratively.

Innovation is also evident in the use of digital media. The teacher uses PowerPoint, instructional videos, and interactive quizzes as supporting media. These media are not used merely to deliver content but are combined with questions and activities after students view the materials. The teacher explained that videos, for example, are used as stimuli to encourage students to identify messages or religious values contained in them before proceeding to discussion.

Observation results indicate that the use of audiovisual media can attract students' attention at the beginning of learning activities. Students appeared more focused when the media were presented and responded when the teacher asked questions after the viewing. This condition indicates that the innovation applied does not lie solely in the use of media but also in how the teacher integrates media with students' thinking activities and interactions.

4.2 Implementation of Islamic Religious Education Learning Innovation

The implementation of learning innovation takes place through the stages of opening, content delivery, student activities, and evaluation. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher asks questions related to students' everyday experiences. This strategy is used to establish connections between IRE materials and students' lives. The teacher then provides a brief explanation of the material before directing students to group discussions or collaborative assignments.

Observation of the first meeting showed that not all students were active at the beginning of the lesson. Some students tended to remain silent when the teacher asked direct questions. This condition changed when students were given opportunities to discuss in groups. Interaction among students became more intensive, and several students who had previously been passive began to express their opinions to group members.

The teacher was also observed not to dominate the entire learning process. The teacher moved from one group to another, asked prompting questions, assisted students experiencing difficulties, and provided reinforcement for the answers given. This role indicates that the teacher functioned more as a facilitator guiding the learning process than as the sole source of information. During presentations, students were given opportunities to present their discussion results in front of the class. Students from other groups were also given opportunities to provide responses and ask questions. Observation results indicate two-way interaction between teachers and students as well as among students. This process provided opportunities for students to develop confidence in speaking and communicating their understanding of IRE materials.

4.3 Student Learning Engagement

Student learning engagement was evident in several forms, including asking and answering questions, participating in discussions, expressing opinions, collaborating, and completing assignments. Engagement did not emerge uniformly among all students. Some students were active from the beginning of the lesson, while others required stimulation, peer support, and questions from the teacher before becoming involved. Students stated that learning was more interesting when it did not consist solely of listening to the teacher's explanations.

According to them, discussion activities and the use of videos made the material easier to understand and increased their confidence in expressing opinions. A similar view was expressed by another student, who stated that assigning roles within groups encouraged each member to take responsibility for participating in learning activities.

These findings were reinforced by observation results. During discussions, students were seen exchanging ideas, dividing tasks, finding answers, and preparing presentation materials. Several students who had previously appeared passive during whole-class activities became involved when activities were conducted in small groups. During presentations, a number of students demonstrated confidence in presenting discussion results and responding to other groups. Engagement was also evident in students' ability to connect IRE materials with everyday experiences. When the teacher asked questions related to honesty, social relationships, social media use, responsibility, and relationships with others, students found it easier to respond because these issues were close to their everyday lives. This finding indicates that a contextual approach is one factor that helps students understand and respond to learning materials.

4.4 Changes in Classroom Interaction Patterns

One important finding of the study is the change in interaction patterns during the implementation of varied learning activities. When the teacher delivered direct explanations, interaction tended to be dominated by the teacher and student responses were relatively limited. When learning continued with discussions, question-and-answer activities, presentations, or audiovisual media, interaction became more dynamic.

The teacher asked open-ended questions and gave students opportunities to provide answers based on their own understanding. Answers that were not fully correct were not immediately judged as wrong but were guided through subsequent questions. This approach encouraged students to become more willing to attempt answers. Another student also stated that they became more confident in answering because the teacher did not immediately reject an answer when it was not fully correct.

Observation results show that this teacher approach created a more open learning atmosphere. Students appeared more willing to respond, although some still required encouragement. Thus, learning innovation not only affects the variety of activities but also influences the patterns of communication that occur during the learning process.

4.5 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The implementation of IRE learning innovation is supported by teacher creativity, the availability of learning media, support from the school environment, and students' responses to varied learning activities. Teachers have flexibility in selecting methods and media according to the learning materials. Group work is also a supporting factor because it enables students to help one another and provides opportunities for less-confident students to participate through group activities. Nevertheless, the study identified several obstacles. Based on the teacher interview, limited instructional time is one of the barriers to implementing learning activities that require discussion and presentation. Differences in students' abilities and characteristics also result in unequal levels of engagement. In addition, the use of digital media may encounter technical problems such as internet connectivity or limited facilities.

Observation also showed that not all students became active immediately when learning innovations were implemented. Some students still tended to remain silent and follow their peers' opinions within groups. The teacher needed to provide questions gradually, offer guidance, and allow students time to prepare their answers before presenting them in front of the class. These findings indicate that learning innovation requires sustained classroom management and a gradual process for its benefits to be experienced more evenly.

Based on the interview and observation results, IRE learning innovation at SMP Kemala Bhayangkari 1 Medan was demonstrated through varied methods, the use of learning media, group learning, prompting questions, presentations, and the integration of learning materials

with students' everyday lives. These strategies provided greater opportunities for students to participate in the learning process. Student engagement was most evident when learning activities enabled them to interact directly. Students demonstrated engagement by asking questions, answering questions, participating in discussions, expressing opinions, collaborating, giving presentations, and completing assignments. Students also showed more positive responses when the material was connected to issues that were close to their everyday lives.

The findings show that IRE learning innovation does not depend solely on the use of technology. A more determining factor is the teacher's ability to design learning experiences that give students opportunities to think, speak, collaborate, make decisions, and connect IRE materials with real-life situations. Digital media function as supporting tools, while learning activities and interaction patterns constitute the main elements that encourage student engagement.

Thus, the findings indicate a tendency for the implementation of IRE learning innovation to encourage student learning engagement, although engagement is not yet evenly distributed. Students who tend to be passive still require guidance and specific strategies from the teacher. The success of learning innovation is therefore closely related to teacher creativity, the suitability of methods to the learning materials, student characteristics, the availability of facilities, and the teacher's ability to create a safe and participatory learning environment.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, IRE learning innovation at SMP Kemala Bhayangkari 1 Medan is implemented through varied methods, the use of digital learning media, group discussions, question-and-answer activities, presentations, and the integration of learning materials with students' everyday experiences. These innovations provide greater opportunities for students to participate in the learning process. Student engagement is demonstrated through willingness to ask and answer questions, express opinions, participate in discussions, collaborate, give presentations, and complete assignments. Digital media function as supporting tools, while activity variation and the teacher's ability to create open interaction are important elements in encouraging student engagement. Nevertheless, engagement is not yet evenly distributed because some students remain less confident and tend to be passive during learning activities.

IRE learning innovation needs to be understood as a change in students' learning experiences rather than merely the use of new technology or media. Teachers play a strategic role in selecting methods appropriate to the characteristics of the learning materials and students' needs, as well as in creating a learning environment that enables students to think, engage in dialogue, collaborate, and connect Islamic values with real-life situations. This study implies that the development of innovative IRE learning should be contextual and continuous, taking into account teacher readiness, student characteristics, available facilities, and school environmental conditions. Future research could employ quantitative or mixed-methods approaches to measure changes in student engagement more objectively and compare the effectiveness of various forms of IRE learning innovation.

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