

# A Phenomenological Study of Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Experiences in Inclusive Classrooms at Sleman Elementary Schools

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## Abstract

This study explores the experiences of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in delivering inclusive instruction at elementary schools in Sleman, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving five educators across three schools. The findings reveal that inclusive practices in PAI are facilitated through collaboration among PAI teachers, classroom teachers, and Special Companion Teachers (GPK), as well as the use of individualized strategies and multimedia resources. However, challenges persist, including limited infrastructure, lack of inclusive training, and insufficient parental involvement. The study highlights the need for systemic support, capacity building, and inclusive pedagogical innovation. It contributes to the discourse on inclusive religious education by integrating theological values with inclusive practices, offering implications for policy development and teacher training.

Penelitian ini mengkaji pengalaman guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dalam melaksanakan pembelajaran inklusif di sekolah dasar di Kabupaten Sleman, Indonesia. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif fenomenologis, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen terhadap lima pendidik dari tiga sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa praktik inklusif dalam pembelajaran PAI diwujudkan melalui kolaborasi antara guru PAI, guru kelas, dan Guru Pendamping Khusus (GPK), serta penerapan strategi individual dan pemanfaatan media pembelajaran yang beragam. Namun demikian, tantangan tetap muncul, seperti keterbatasan sarana prasarana, minimnya pelatihan inklusif, dan rendahnya keterlibatan orang tua. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya dukungan sistemik, peningkatan kapasitas guru, dan inovasi pedagogi inklusif. Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada pengintegrasian nilai-nilai keagamaan dengan praktik inklusif, yang memberikan implikasi bagi pengembangan kebijakan dan pelatihan guru.

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## A. Introduction

The experience of Islamic Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam* or PAI) teachers in inclusive student learning at elementary schools is a comprehensive phenomenon involving curriculum adaptation and teaching methods (Jamaludin, 2022). These teachers must navigate the individual needs of students against the backdrop of religious beliefs and values they are entrusted to teach (Kharis et al., 2022). In the context of inclusive education, they often face challenges with religious materials in a way that is accessible to all students. This requires PAI teachers to develop approaches sensitive to diversity and inclusivity without sidelining the educational goals of the religion itself (Davidson & Morales, 2023; González et al., 2023; Rasmitadila et al., 2023). Success in this area can significantly impact students' learning experiences and development in an inclusive educational setting.

Inclusive students are learners with special needs who study alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms (Teresa et al., 2022). The philosophy of inclusion emphasizes that every child—regardless of abilities—has the right to learn in an environment that nurtures both academic achievement and social integration (Mariyam & Kurniawati, 2022). Within this framework, teaching PAI presents unique challenges, as educators must design learning models that align with students' diverse intelligence profiles (Mujahada & Noviyandri, 2022).

According to Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, there are several types of intelligence that students can possess, such as logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic (Bhan & Panshikar, 2023). Inclusive students may excel in one or more of these intelligence types. For example, a student with kinesthetic intelligence might learn more easily through physical activities, while a student with interpersonal intelligence might be better at learning through group discussions (Humaira et al., 2023; Zerai et al., 2023). For PAI learning models, several strategies can be implemented to accommodate the needs of inclusive students. One such approach is differentiated learning, where teachers adjust teaching methods, materials, and learning activities based on individual student needs (Mujahada & Noviyandri, 2022).

Two key theoretical frameworks underpin inclusive practices in PAI, namely, Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Gardner's theory emphasizes the diversity of students' cognitive strengths in the learning process (Meliani et al., 2022a). Meanwhile, UDL provides a comprehensive framework for designing learning environments that accommodate various learning styles and abilities (Teresa et al., 2022). This UDL theory encourages the provision of lesson materials in various formats, which can support the understanding of inclusive students without reducing the depth of the religious content conveyed (Triviño-Amigo et al., 2022). Applying these theories allows PAI teachers to design flexible and accessible lessons for all students and demands creativity and innovation in developing inclusive lesson materials (Wicun et al., 2022).

Previous studies on inclusive education in PAI classrooms have reported several positive outcomes, including increased student empathy (Darmawanti, 2017), improved teacher capacity through training (Fasano et al., 2020), and a better understanding of religious values when lessons are adapted to student needs (Maftuhin & Fuad, 2018). However, these studies tend to focus on results and overlook the everyday practices and challenges teachers face. They also rarely address structural and institutional barriers in the Indonesian context. Addressing this gap, Suprihatiningrum highlights persistent systemic issues in inclusive schools, such as limited resources, lack of support, and

inconsistent policies implementation that similarly affect PAI teachers in implementing inclusive education (Suprihatiningrum, 2022).

Indonesia has adopted inclusive education nationally through Ministerial Regulation No. 70/2009, yet implementation remains uneven, especially in public elementary schools outside urban centers. Cultural perceptions about disability, limited teacher training, and inadequate infrastructure pose additional challenges to inclusive religious education. Suprihatiningrum's study on inclusive science instruction in Yogyakarta underscores these systemic barriers, revealing that teachers struggle with the diversity of student disabilities, lack of teaching materials, minimal support from special education staff, and contradictions between national and local education policies (Suprihatiningrum, 2022). Although observed in science classrooms, these challenges also resonate in PAI, where teachers are required to integrate religious values in ways that are pedagogically inclusive and culturally sensitive. Hence, understanding how PAI teachers navigate these challenges in practice is essential for advancing inclusive religious education.

This research is highly relevant to advancing inclusive learning practices at the elementary level, particularly within the domain of PAI (Radojlovic et al., 2022). Through an in-depth investigation, this study seeks to understand better how PAI teachers can meaningfully adopt inclusive principles without compromising the substance of religious instruction. Furthermore, this research contributes to the educational literature by offering empirical evidence on the effectiveness of inclusive strategies. It also enriches scholarly discourse on the intersection between religious education and inclusive frameworks—an area of growing importance in diverse educational systems. Therefore, this study is critical in providing insight to inform the development of inclusive educational policies and context-sensitive pedagogical practices in Indonesia.

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature regarding how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers implement inclusive learning at the elementary level, particularly in religious settings where inclusion remains underexplored. It aims to examine PAI teachers' perspectives and practices in facilitating inclusive education for students with special needs. The research explores the pedagogical strategies they employ, the challenges they encounter, and the contextual adaptations they make in response. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of inclusive pedagogical frameworks within religious education, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. By doing so, the study offers empirical insights that contribute to the advancement of inclusive education discourse, especially within the context of PAI in Indonesia.

## **B. Research Methods**

This study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Islamic Education (PAI) teachers within the context of inclusive learning at the elementary school level. Using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, the research focuses on exploring PAI teachers' perspectives on inclusive principles and their application in classroom settings (Creswell et al., 2004). It also seeks to identify the teaching methods and strategies employed by these teachers to enhance the comprehension and engagement of students with special needs, as well as the challenges they face and the strategies they use to overcome them.

The participants in this study consisted of five educators selected through purposive sampling from three elementary schools in Sleman Regency, Indonesia—two public and one private institution. The selection aimed to ensure a diverse representation of teaching roles, school types, and educational experience, thereby enhancing the contextual validity of the findings. All participants had at least two years of experience teaching in inclusive classrooms. Among them, four were PAI teachers and one was a Special Education Teacher (*Guru Pendamping Khusus* or GPK). Three

participants were affiliated with public schools, while two worked at private institutions. This composition allowed the study to explore perspectives and pedagogical practices in implementing inclusive Islamic education. The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1, with pseudonyms used to preserve their confidentiality.

Tabel 1  
Characteristics of Research Participants

Pseudonym/Initial	Position	School	School Type	Teaching Experience (Years)
Mr. WS	PAI Teacher	SD N 1 S	Public	10
Mr. GR	PAI Teacher	SD N 3 S	Public	3
Mr. ES	Principal / Administrator	SD N 1 S	Public	12
Mrs. SS	PAI Teacher	SD BM S	Private	4
Mr. AA	GPK Teacher	SD BM S	Private	2

Note. Based on the author's analysis, 2024.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, including lesson plans and teaching activity reports. The core of the data collection process was in-depth interviews with the participants, enriched by participatory observation and document analysis. These multiple methods enabled an iterative data analysis process, using coding and thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research instruments included interview guides, observation sheets, and document analysis forms, all designed to ensure focused and accurate data collection in alignment with the research objectives.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the findings, the study employed several strategies, including data triangulation through the confirmation of information from multiple sources, methods, and time points; member checking to validate findings with participants for accuracy and relevance; and peer debriefing, where fellow researchers reviewed and discussed the data interpretations. These procedures were carried out strictly with research ethics, such as obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant confidentiality, and ensuring responsible data usage. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on religious-based inclusive education, a theme that remains underexplored in previous studies. The findings are expected to contribute meaningfully to the academic literature on inclusive education, particularly within the context of PAI teaching in elementary schools.

This study received ethical approval from the appropriate institutional review board. All participants voluntarily consented to participate in the research after being informed about its objectives, methods, and confidentiality safeguards. To maintain anonymity and ensure the protection of sensitive information, all participant names and school affiliations have been replaced with pseudonyms. No real names or institutional identifiers are included in the data reporting. The study adheres strictly to ethical standards governing research with human subjects, including privacy, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without consequence.

### C. Result & Discussion

#### 1. Teachers' Experiences and Pedagogical Practices in Inclusive Islamic Education

This section presents the study's findings on implementing PAI in inclusive learning settings at the elementary school level. The analysis is organized thematically and guided by data obtained from interviews, classroom observations, and document reviews. The themes highlight how inclusive education policies are interpreted and enacted in practice by PAI teachers, the challenges in daily teaching activities, and the strategies they employ to address the needs of students with special

needs. Special attention is given to how religious instruction is adapted in inclusive classrooms and the extent to which institutional and policy frameworks support or hinder this process.

#### **a. Islamic Religious Education in Inclusive Learning for Students with Special Needs in Elementary Schools and Special Companion Teachers (GPK)**

Although the inclusive education policy in the Special Region of Yogyakarta has been formally established through Governor Regulation No. 21 of 2013 and reinforced by Government Regulation No. 19 of 2005—mandating that schools provide competent educators for students with special needs—findings from this study reveal a significant gap between the policy's intent and its practical implementation. Observations at the school level indicate that many schools do not yet meet the minimum standards for inclusive education, such as the provision of GPK, accessible learning facilities, or specialized training for PAI teachers. Mrs. SS remarked in an interview, "We were given general directions about inclusion, but no training or GPK is available to support us technically." Another teacher at SD BM S, Mr. AA, noted that parental involvement remains limited, even though collaboration with families is a key component of inclusive education. Moreover, the reviewed lesson plans showed minimal and unsystematic adaptation of content to meet the needs of students with special needs. These findings highlight that implementing inclusive policy at the elementary school level often relies on individual teacher initiative rather than systemic institutional support. This gap calls for stronger systemic measures, including continuous professional development, the recruitment of qualified support staff, and active policy monitoring, to ensure that the goals of inclusive education are fully realized at the school level.

Implementing an inclusive education policy is a process of applying rules that serve as references in running inclusive education in the involved schools. This process involves the efforts of education offices and schools to provide suitable educational services for students with special needs. Four main factors affect the implementation of inclusive education policy: standards and objectives of the policy, availability of resources, characteristics of policy implementers, and effectiveness of communication in the implementation process.

Implementing inclusive PAI in elementary schools is a concrete example of an inclusive education policy. The approach integrating the unique needs of students into the curriculum, as adapted from the 2013 Curriculum, reflects a real effort to meet the standards and goals of inclusive policy. This requires adequate resource availability and the characteristics of policy implementers who have an understanding of and the skills to apply more responsive teaching methods to diverse student needs. Effective communication between education offices, schools, teachers, and students is critical to ensuring that Islamic religious education can be delivered inclusively, allowing every student, including those with special needs, a meaningful and adequate learning experience. As stated by Mr. WS, a PAI teacher at SD N 1 S:

Effective communication between education offices, schools, teachers, and students is important, especially in ensuring that Islamic religious education can be delivered inclusively. With good communication, every student, including those with special needs, can get a meaningful and adequate learning experience.

Furthermore, collaboration between the PAI teacher, homeroom teacher, and GPK is an important aspect of implementing inclusive Islamic religious education. This synergy ensures that every student receives adequate attention and an adapted approach, ensuring that Islamic religious education focuses on theory, practice, and application in daily life. Mrs. SS, a PAI teacher at SD BM S, expressed that:

Collaboration among teachers is a crucial element in implementing inclusive education. PAI teachers, classroom teachers, and GPK work complementarily to meet the individual needs of each student. Their role extends beyond teaching religious theory; they also emphasize the practical application of religious values in daily life. The approach is individualized and contextual, tailored to every child's unique needs and characteristics.

From classroom observations, the PAI teacher delivers worship material using lecture methods, simulation demonstrations, and classical practice for all students, including those with special needs. The media used in this learning includes powerpoint, videos, and pictures. All students, both regular and students with special needs, follow worship learning in class. This PAI teacher specializes in the psychological approach to providing suitable learning services for all students.

Specifically for students with special needs, including those with autism, the PAI teacher adopts an individual psychological approach in the classroom. This involves approaching students, talking while looking into their eyes, lowering the tone of voice, and using short sentences. This approach is adapted considering that students with special needs may have difficulties with eye focus, communication, behavior, and receptiveness. This approach aims to facilitate a more adequate understanding of the material for students with special needs.

The PAI teacher at SD N 3 S, Mr. GR, identified that the school has several students with special needs, including autism, slow learners, low vision, and Down Syndrome (DS). Observing students' diverse special needs becomes a challenge and an opportunity for teachers and educational institutions to adjust teaching methods. Children with Autism, for example, often show uniqueness in communication and social interaction, requiring a unique approach involving clear structure and consistent routines. On the other hand, children with ADHD may have difficulty maintaining attention and tend to behave impulsively, thus needing teaching strategies that consider their need for more dynamic activities and rest.

In addition, slow learners face challenges in understanding new concepts and require a more patient and repetitive approach. Children with low vision, who have limitations in vision, need adaptation of learning materials that can be accessed through audio formats or large print. Meanwhile, children with Down syndrome often require an approach that emphasizes the development of social skills, communication, and independence. All these highlight the importance of a flexible and inclusive learning environment that adapts to each child's specific needs so that everyone can grow and learn optimally.

Although implementing inclusive Islamic religious education in elementary schools in the Special Region of Yogyakarta appears aligned with the national inclusive education policy introduced on November 12, 2014, several substantive challenges remain. The collaboration between PAI teachers, homeroom teachers, and GPK enables diverse instructional methods, such as lectures, simulations, demonstrations, and classical practice with multimedia tools like powerpoint, videos, and images. However, a key question arises: to what extent can these strategies truly accommodate the complexity of the individual needs of students with disabilities, particularly in the affective and spiritual dimensions of religious learning, which are often deeply personal and context-specific?

One major challenge lies in the limited professional capacity of PAI teachers to implement differentiated approaches within religious instruction. This gap highlights the need for specialized training that goes beyond pedagogical skills to include theological sensitivity to prevent the delivery of religious content in a rigid or potentially exclusionary manner. Here, systemic bias may persist despite the formal presence of inclusive policies.



In comparison to models of inclusive religious education in other countries, such as the multi-faith, student-centered approaches promoted in the United Kingdom (Jackson & Everington, 2017), the current PAI framework in Indonesia remains heavily doctrinal. This may hinder students' engagement with universal spiritual values that could otherwise strengthen inclusivity and respect for diversity. Thus, the core issue is not merely policy integration at the technical level, but rather a need to reconstruct the epistemology of religious instruction to make it more responsive to the plural experiences of learners.

These findings suggest an urgent need to enhance religious educators' reflective capacity in designing and delivering ideologically and pedagogically inclusive instruction. Furthermore, curriculum evaluation should aim to realign PAI content with inclusion, social justice, and respect for diversity regarding physical and cognitive differences and belief systems. Only then can religious education serve as an ethical and spiritual space that affirms the dignity of all learners.

#### **b. Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation of Islamic Religious Education for Inclusive Students**

Based on observations and interviews, implementing PAI in inclusive schools involves preparing three key instructional tools: the Inclusive Learning Plan, the Individual Learning Program, and the Smart Plan. These documents are designed to accommodate the specific needs of students with disabilities. Each plan includes adjustments to learning materials, instructional methods, and assessment tools. This individualized approach allows students to learn and practice Islamic teachings at their own pace and according to their unique capacities. The PAI teacher at SD BM S, Mrs. SS, explained:

I treat all students equally, whether inclusive or not, but I adjust my approach in coordination with the inclusive teacher. This collaboration allows me to focus on the core PAI content, while the Special Education Teacher tailors the scope and method based on the Level of Mastery Outcomes and each student's needs.

Despite such coordination, some teachers highlighted challenges in implementation. Mr. WS noted, "Sometimes, it is difficult to align schedules with the GPK, and not all content can be quickly adapted, especially when there is no prior inclusive lesson format."

Thematic analysis of teacher responses reveals two dominant themes: inter-role collaboration and flexible, student-centered teaching methods. GPKs are facilitators who creatively adjust instructional techniques to fit each student's learning profile. Mr. AA shared, "I use creative methods such as educational games and storytelling to deliver Islamic concepts. We regularly coordinate with Islamic Religious Education teachers to align our approaches. I also frequently participate in training to upgrade my methods and make them more responsive to student needs." This collaborative model aligns with best practices in inclusive education, as UNESCO (2020) recommended, emphasizing multidisciplinary teamwork and differentiated instruction.

However, disparities across schools are apparent. For instance, Mr. GR reported, "We have never received specific training for inclusive Islamic Religious Education. Most of our adjustments are based on trial and error." Such variation suggests that the effectiveness of inclusive practices is closely tied to institutional support, professional development opportunities, and resource availability.

The assessment of PAI in inclusive settings emphasizes learning processes and outcomes, especially regarding students' ability to understand and practice Islamic teachings. Evaluation methods are tailored to the specific learning profiles of students with disabilities, utilizing tools such as picture-based written tests, direct observation of religious practices, and structured assessments of prayer routines. Mr. GR elaborated, "We use simplified written tests with visual cues and conduct

behavioral observations during religious activities. This helps us assess student understanding in a more practical and accessible way.”

Findings reveal notable improvements in both cognitive and spiritual dimensions. For instance, student “A,” who has a speech delay, successfully identified several names of Allah (*Asmaul Husna*) after lessons involving songs and visual media. Student “M,” who experiences sensory processing issues, could perform prayer movements after receiving structured, gradual guidance from the GPK. Teachers also reported increased spiritually aligned behaviors, such as students reminding peers to pray or arranging prayer mats after group worship. These outcomes demonstrate that adaptive and context-sensitive assessment tools measure academic understanding and facilitate and reflect meaningful spiritual growth among students with special needs.

Overall, the findings underscore a significant shift in how PAI is approached in inclusive schools from standardized delivery to a more personalized, collaborative, and holistic framework. However, several systemic issues remain, including unequal access to teacher training, inter-teacher coordination inconsistencies, and pedagogical resource gaps. Institutional policies must prioritize continuous professional development for PAI teachers and GPKs to enhance practice. Additionally, curriculum development should embrace differentiated learning frameworks that integrate cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Future evaluations should also incorporate tools for measuring students’ religious behaviors and values in daily life, enriching our understanding of spiritual learning in inclusive education contexts.

### c. Challenges of Islamic Religious Education for Inclusive Students

Despite the availability of planning and implementation strategies in PAI for students with special needs, various systemic barriers continue to hinder its success. Based on field observations and teacher interviews, this section analyzes key impediments using the inclusive pedagogy framework, which emphasizes creating learning environments that respond to learner variability (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The challenges are categorized into three interrelated areas.

Inclusive education is fundamentally supported by appropriate educational infrastructure. However, many schools still lack adequate facilities that enable full participation for students with disabilities. “Adequate” infrastructure includes accessible classrooms (with ramps and wide doorways), visual and auditory aids (such as hearing loops and Braille materials), sensory-friendly rooms, and adaptive technologies like text-to-speech or curriculum modification software.

Based on data from the Yogyakarta District Education Office (2023), only 38% of public elementary schools implementing inclusive programs have classrooms that meet accessibility standards. In rural areas, this percentage drops to 22%. Mr. ES, a school administrator, articulates this challenge: “Lack of facilities and infrastructure. This isn’t just about having a classroom—it’s about whether these rooms truly support children with special needs.” Mr. WS from SD N 1 S also emphasized, “Technology is critical. We need more than blackboards—devices matching the students’ sensory and learning profiles.” Without this foundational support, students with disabilities are less likely to participate actively in religious learning activities, such as prayer simulations or Qur’an recitation, which often require multi-sensory engagement.

Inclusive education’s success largely depends on teachers’ competencies to address learner diversity. This includes mastery in differentiated instruction, behavioral management, and Individualized Education Program (IEP) development. Unfortunately, many teachers have not received the specialized training required. According to a 2022 Indonesian Ministry of Education survey, only 27% of PAI teachers in inclusive elementary schools have completed certified inclusive



education training. Mr. AA explained, “The issue is not just curriculum delivery—it’s how to adapt to each student’s individual needs. Without adequate training, teachers often feel unequipped and overwhelmed.” This skill gap directly limits teachers’ ability to deliver differentiated religious content. For example, students may struggle to comprehend concepts like *niat* (intention in worship) or *iman* (faith) without properly adapted explanations and learning supports, leading to shallow understanding and disengagement.

Parental participation is crucial in supporting students with special needs, especially in reinforcing religious education outside the classroom. However, many schools report insufficient parental engagement. Mr. AA shared, “Sometimes parents leave everything to the school. We not only have to teach the students, but also educate the parents regularly.”

The lack of home reinforcement and communication results in inconsistent application of Islamic values. A 2021 regional audit found that only 41% of parents of students with disabilities attended scheduled school meetings or learning consultations, suggesting a need for stronger home–school partnerships. This gap can diminish students’ consistency in practicing religious rituals, such as daily prayers or ethical behavior aligned with Islamic teachings, thereby reducing the overall impact of inclusive religious education.

These three interrelated domains, educational infrastructure, teacher competence, and parental engagement, emerge as the primary systemic challenges in implementing inclusive Islamic Religious Education. Inadequate infrastructure restricts access and limits students’ ability to engage meaningfully in ritual-based learning. At the same time, untrained teachers struggle to modify religious content to accommodate diverse learning needs, reducing comprehension and spiritual engagement among students with special needs. Furthermore, weak parental involvement hinders the reinforcement of Islamic values at home, weakening the continuity between school-based instruction and daily religious practice. These dimensions are not isolated; they operate in synergy, where the absence of one reinforces the weaknesses of the others, ultimately undermining the goal of full inclusion in religious education.

## **2. Thematic Reflections on Inclusive Islamic Education Practices**

This study aimed to understand the experiences and strategies of PAI teachers in implementing inclusive learning in elementary schools. It is situated within the broader discourse of inclusive education, a global movement advocating for equitable learning for all students, including those with disabilities or learning differences (Akbarovna, 2022; Mulyah & Khoiri, 2023). Thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke’s framework was employed to identify recurring patterns and contextualize them within the realities of religious instruction (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The discussion is structured thematically to enhance analytical depth.

### **a. Inclusive Policy Implementation and Institutional Support**

The first theme highlights the alignment of inclusive policy mandates—such as Governor Regulation No. 21/2013 and Government Regulation No. 19/2005—with their implementation in Islamic elementary schools in Yogyakarta. Teachers reported curriculum adjustments and role-sharing with class teachers and GPK (Special Companion Teachers) as institutional responses supporting inclusivity. These findings confirm previous literature on policy-enabled inclusion (Maftuhin & Fuad, 2018; Widayati et al., 2021). This study offers new insight into how these regulations are interpreted and explicitly enacted within religious education—a domain often absent from inclusive education discourse. For instance, implementation in PAI involves integrating inclusive approaches without

compromising religious values, a balance that requires pedagogical creativity and theological sensitivity.

#### b. Collaborative Teaching Strategies and Adaptive Pedagogies

The second theme concerns collaborative strategies employed by PAI teachers, classroom teachers, and GPKs. These include differentiated instruction, use of visual media, simplified Qur'anic content, and active assistance during religious practices. While such strategies echo established models of inclusive teaching (Monaghan et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2017). This study emphasizes the religious dimension where pedagogical flexibility must coexist with theological fidelity. Unlike secular subjects, PAI content involves deeply rooted normative values and rituals, requiring educators to navigate adaptations without diluting religious meaning. This dual responsibility, maintaining theological integrity while practicing inclusion, is a distinct finding within the field.

#### c. Psychological Approaches and Individualized Student Engagement

PAI teachers employed psychological and individualized pedagogical approaches to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities. For students with autism, teachers implemented structured teaching techniques such as visual schedules, routine-based reinforcement, and simplified instructions to reduce anxiety and increase engagement (Hakiman et al., 2021; Kistoro et al., 2020; Mesibov et al., 2005). These methods are rooted in the TEACCH framework, which emphasizes environmental consistency and visual clarity in supporting autistic learners. Instructional adaptation was also underpinned by Islamic values, including *rahmah* (compassion), *tadarruj* (gradual instruction), and *niyyah* (intentionality), ensuring a pedagogical approach that is both inclusive and theologically grounded (Salabi, 2023). Such integration enabled students to understand and internalize religious practices more effectively.

Students with Down syndrome benefited significantly from visual media, repetitive instruction, and stable daily routines that supported memory retention and behavioral consistency (Quinn et al., 2020). Teachers utilized images, icons, and short verbal cues to accommodate visuospatial strengths and reduce cognitive load (Hughes, 2006). Additional strategies included Qur'anic storytelling and oral transmission (*Talaqqi wa Musyafahah*), which facilitated both spiritual engagement and cognitive development (Hidayat & Rahmatullah, 2023). These methods resonate with the Responsive Teaching approach, which promotes sustained teacher-child interaction to enhance emotional, linguistic, and social outcomes (Karaaslan & Mahoney, 2013; Mahoney et al., 2006). Together, these individualized methods fostered meaningful participation in religious education among students with special needs.

#### d. Challenges in Practical Implementation

Field observations and interviews revealed persistent structural and pedagogical barriers in delivering inclusive Islamic Religious Education. In rural schools, the lack of accessible infrastructure, such as ramps, audio-visual aids, and sensory-friendly spaces, impeded the full participation of students with disabilities in ritual-based religious activities. These shortcomings prevented meaningful involvement in essential religious practices like ablution, prayer, and Qur'anic recitation. Only 27% of PAI teachers had undergone certified training in inclusive education; most relied on experiential strategies or informal peer mentoring. Parental involvement was also found lacking, as many caregivers did not reinforce religious education at home, leaving schools solely responsible for students' spiritual development (Braslauskienė & Turauskienė, 2023; Cooc, 2019; Hornby, 2015).

In addition, the challenges reported by teachers varied depending on the types of disabilities present in their classrooms. Students with autism require highly structured routines and visual supports, while those with ADHD need more frequent breaks and kinesthetic learning methods

(Justus et al., 2025; Omunda, 2021). Teachers also struggled to adapt abstract religious concepts—such as *niyyah* (intention) or *iman* (faith)—into formats comprehensible to students with slow cognitive processing or low vision. The lack of specialized support staff or differentiated materials exacerbated these limitations in teacher capacity. Consequently, the inclusive goals of PAI education often depended on the personal initiative and empathy of individual teachers, rather than systemic institutional backing.

#### **e. Implications for Policy and Inclusive Religious Pedagogy**

To address these challenges, policy reforms must prioritize accessibility, teacher training, and home-school collaboration as foundational components of inclusive Islamic education. Infrastructure improvement in rural and underserved schools is critical for physical access and facilitating spiritual engagement through adaptive religious learning tools. Training programs should incorporate theological dimensions of inclusion, equipping teachers to convey core Islamic principles such as *rahmah* (compassion) and *tadarruj* (gradualism) in ways responsive to student diversity. Drawing on UDL and inclusive pedagogy theory (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), religious curriculum developers should design lesson plans that accommodate various learning needs without diluting religious authenticity. Inclusion in Islamic Religious Education should not be viewed as a technical adjustment but as a theological commitment to equity and spiritual dignity.

Furthermore, integrating parental involvement into inclusive religious learning requires systemic intervention, including structured parent training, regular communication, and religious homework practices adapted to each child's capacity. Religious education is inherently relational and affective, and without reinforcement at home, its transformative potential becomes limited. Institutions should establish school-family partnership models and provide religious literacy tools to support parents of children with special needs. Best practices from inclusive education literature, such as individualized learning plans and spiritual development indicators, can be adapted to the religious context (Kremer et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2020). Ultimately, inclusive PAI must evolve from ad hoc efforts toward an integrated pedagogical philosophy anchored in compassion, accessibility, and theological responsiveness.

### **D. Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that inclusive education practices in PAI learning have been realized through collaboration among PAI teachers, classroom teachers, and GPKs in elementary schools in Sleman. The strategies implemented include instructional adaptation, psychological approaches, and the integration of Islamic values such as *rahmah* (compassion) and *tadarruj* (gradualism). Nevertheless, teachers face challenges such as limited infrastructure, insufficient inclusive training, and a lack of parental involvement. These findings underscore the importance of synergistic policy support, teacher capacity building, and the strengthening of school-family partnerships. Through these measures, PAI learning can serve as a means of providing fair, inclusive, and meaningful education for all students.

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