



The Exploration of PAI Teachers' Strategies in Implementing Inclusive Learning for Students with Special Needs at MIN 2 Gayo Lues

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DOI:



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Diajukan: 10/05/2026

Diterima: 25/05/2026

Diterbitkan: 14/07/2026

ABSTRAK

Inclusive education has become a global policy imperative, yet its realization within faith-based instruction in Indonesian madrasah settings remains poorly understood. This study explores the pedagogical strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam, PAI) teachers in implementing inclusive learning for students with special needs at MIN 2 Gayo Lues, a state Islamic elementary school in a rural highland district of Aceh, Indonesia. Adopting a qualitative single-case study design, data were generated through semi-structured interviews with four PAI teachers, non-participant classroom observation, and document analysis over a three-month period. Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's reflexive procedure, supported by NVivo 14, with trustworthiness ensured through triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Findings indicate that PAI teachers enacted inclusion through four interlocking strategies: differentiated and multisensory delivery of religious content, peer-mediated spiritual scaffolding, affective relational accommodation grounded in Islamic values of compassion (*rahmah*), and improvised curricular modification compensating for the absence of formal individualized education programs. These strategies were constrained by limited specialist training, absent shadow teachers, and minimal institutional support. The study's novelty lies in theorizing inclusion within PAI as a value-mediated rather than merely technical practice, extending Universal Design for Learning into a faith-based, resource-constrained madrasah context underrepresented in the literature. Practically, the findings inform madrasah-specific teacher professional development and evidence-based inclusion policy for religious education in peripheral regions.

Keywords: inclusive education; Islamic religious education; special needs; PAI teachers; madrasah; teaching strategies; Universal Design for Learning

ABSTRACT

Pendidikan inklusif telah menjadi tuntutan kebijakan global, namun implementasinya dalam pembelajaran keagamaan pada madrasah di Indonesia masih belum banyak dipahami. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi strategi pedagogis guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dalam mengimplementasikan pembelajaran inklusif bagi peserta didik berkebutuhan khusus di MIN 2 Gayo Lues, sebuah madrasah ibtidaiyah negeri di wilayah dataran tinggi pedesaan Aceh, Indonesia. Dengan desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap empat guru PAI, observasi kelas non-partisipan, dan analisis dokumen selama tiga bulan. Data dianalisis secara tematik mengikuti prosedur reflektif Braun dan Clarke dengan bantuan NVivo 14, sementara keabsahan data dijaga melalui triangulasi, member checking, dan jejak audit. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru PAI menerapkan inklusi melalui empat strategi yang saling terkait: penyampaian materi keagamaan secara terdiferensiasi dan multisensori, scaffolding spiritual berbasis teman sebaya, akomodasi relasional afektif yang berlandaskan nilai kasih sayang (*rahmah*), serta modifikasi kurikulum improvisatif untuk mengatasi ketiadaan

program pembelajaran individual formal. Strategi tersebut dibatasi oleh keterbatasan pelatihan khusus, ketiadaan guru pendamping, dan minimnya dukungan kelembagaan. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada penerapan inklusi dalam PAI sebagai praktik yang dimediasi nilai, bukan semata teknis, serta memperluas Universal Design for Learning ke dalam konteks madrasah berbasis agama dengan sumber daya terbatas. Secara praktis, temuan ini bermanfaat bagi pengembangan profesional guru madrasah dan kebijakan inklusi berbasis bukti pada pendidikan keagamaan di wilayah perifer.

Kata kunci: pendidikan inklusif; pendidikan agama Islam; berkebutuhan khusus; guru PAI; madrasah; strategi pembelajaran; Universal Design for Learning

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I. INTRODUCTION

The global movement toward inclusive education has reframed schooling as an ethical and civic obligation rather than a discretionary provision for a minority of learners. Since the Salamanca Statement, and reinforced by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Sustainable Development Goal 4, national systems have been urged to guarantee equitable access to quality education for all children irrespective of ability (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusion, in its contemporary conception, is understood not as the physical placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms but as the systematic transformation of pedagogy, curriculum, and school culture to accommodate the full spectrum of human diversity (Florian, 2019). Nevertheless, the distance between this normative aspiration and its everyday enactment remains substantial, particularly where inclusive mandates confront under-resourced schools and teachers who have never received specialized preparation. Understanding how ordinary teachers translate an ambitious global agenda into workable classroom practice therefore constitutes a question of continuing scholarly and policy urgency.

Recent empirical scholarship has converged on the recognition that teachers are the decisive mediators of inclusive reform, yet it has also exposed persistent obstacles to their effectiveness. Studies across diverse systems report that positive teacher attitudes, though necessary, are frequently undermined by inadequate training, limited resources, and weak institutional support (Saloviita, 2020; Woodcock et al., 2022). Investigations of teacher self-efficacy demonstrate that confidence in managing diverse classrooms predicts the adoption of inclusive practices more reliably than policy compliance alone (Yada et al., 2022). Comparative work in developing contexts further reveals that inclusion is often implemented informally and improvisationally, with teachers devising ad hoc accommodations in the absence of formal support structures (Muega & Echavia, 2021; Sharma et al., 2021). A parallel strand examining Universal Design for Learning has shown its promise for pre-empting barriers to participation, while cautioning that its application in low-resource and non-Western settings remains thin (Ok et al., 2021). Taken together, this body of evidence suggests that inclusion is enacted less through prescribed technique than through situated, resourceful, and value-laden teacher judgement a synthesis that foregrounds the interpretive agency of teachers rather than the fidelity of policy transfer.

A further and consequential line of inquiry concerns the preparation and support systems that surround teachers. Cross-national reviews indicate that inclusive education is frequently mandated at the level of policy while the professional infrastructure required to sustain it specialist training, accompanying personnel, individualised planning, and adequate materials lags far behind, producing a persistent implementation gap (Van Mieghem et al., 2020; Amor et al., 2019). Within Indonesia specifically, empirical accounts document that mainstream teachers often assume responsibility for learners with special needs without corresponding preparation, leading them to rely on experiential and improvised strategies (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Sugianto & Rahmawati, 2022). These studies collectively suggest that the decisive variable is not the formal existence of inclusive policy but the situated capacity of teachers to enact it, a capacity shaped as much by disposition and context as by technical training. This synthesis reframes the research problem away from compliance and toward the lived pedagogy of inclusion, thereby motivating close qualitative attention to teacher practice in under-resourced settings.

This study is anchored in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, complemented by the social model of disability. UDL conceptualises inclusive teaching as the proactive provision of multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression, thereby locating the source of barriers in inflexible instructional design rather than in learner deficit (Ok et al., 2021). This orientation is theoretically appropriate for the present inquiry because it directs analytic attention to how teachers structure learning environments and adapt content, which is precisely the object of investigation. The social model complements UDL by framing disability as a product of environmental and attitudinal barriers, aligning conceptually with Islamic ethical principles that emphasize the dignity and equal worth of every learner. Together these perspectives furnish a lens capable of interpreting inclusion in Islamic Religious Education not merely as a technical accommodation but as a value-mediated pedagogical practice.

Despite this expanding literature, several gaps warrant attention. Methodologically, the field remains dominated by attitudinal surveys and large-scale quantitative designs that capture teachers' dispositions but rarely illuminate the fine-grained strategies through which inclusion is actually accomplished, leaving qualitative accounts of enactment comparatively scarce (Woodcock et al., 2022). Contextually, the overwhelming majority of evidence originates in Western or urban settings, whereas rural, peripheral, and faith-based schools which educate substantial populations across the Global South are markedly underrepresented (Sharma et al., 2021). Empirically, the specific practices of Islamic Religious Education teachers, who deliver a subject saturated with moral and spiritual content yet operate with minimal specialist provision, have received almost no systematic examination (Aziz et al., 2023). Theoretically, prevailing frameworks such as UDL have been developed and validated in secular Western contexts and have not been interrogated for their applicability to value-laden religious instruction in resource-constrained madrasah environments. These gaps matter because inclusion policies imported without contextual grounding risk irrelevance, and because the moral resources embedded in religious education may constitute an untapped foundation for inclusive practice.

The novelty of this study is threefold. Conceptually, it advances an understanding of inclusion within Islamic Religious Education as a value-mediated practice in which theological principles of compassion and human dignity are mobilized as pedagogical resources, thereby integrating faith-based ethics with mainstream inclusion theory. Methodologically, it employs an in-depth qualitative case study to render visible the situated, moment-to-moment strategies of enactment that survey research cannot capture, generating thick description of practice in an authentic setting. Contextually, it examines a rural, highland, state Islamic elementary school in Gayo Lues a setting largely absent from the international evidence base thereby extending the geography of inclusion scholarship beyond its customary Western and urban confines. These contributions collectively reposition faith-based religious education as a substantive rather than peripheral site of inclusive pedagogy.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore and interpret the strategies employed by PAI teachers in implementing inclusive learning for students with special needs at MIN 2 Gayo Lues, and to examine the enabling and constraining conditions that shape those strategies. Two questions guide the inquiry: first, what strategies do PAI teachers use to include students with special needs in religious learning; and second, what factors facilitate or impede the implementation of these strategies within this madrasah context? By addressing these questions, the study seeks to contribute both a contextually grounded account of inclusive PAI practice and a theoretical extension of inclusion frameworks to faith-based settings.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine, in depth and within its real-life context, how transformative Islamic education shapes students' character at a single bounded institution. A case study approach was selected because the research question is explanatory and process-oriented, concerned with the how of character formation rather than its frequency or magnitude (Yin, 2018). The single-case, holistic design was appropriate given the distinctiveness of the setting: SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah is a purposively significant instance of an integrated Islamic lower-secondary school embedded in the Gayo highland community of Blangkejeren, Gayo Lues, within Aceh's shariah-governed jurisdiction.

Focusing on one information-rich case permitted the analytical depth necessary to trace mechanisms that broader comparative designs typically obscure.

The research was conducted over four months at SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah, and participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture complementary perspectives on the phenomenon. Fifteen participants were recruited: two school leaders, six teachers, four students, and three parents, chosen for their direct and sustained involvement in the school's character-formation practices. This composition enabled data-source triangulation across those who design, deliver, receive, and reinforce the educational process. Sampling continued until informational redundancy was reached, at which point additional interviews yielded no substantively new themes, indicating that thematic saturation had been achieved.

Data were collected through three complementary instruments: semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. The interview guides differentiated for leaders, teachers, students, and parents were developed from the transformative learning and character-education literature and refined through expert review by two academics in Islamic education, establishing content validity; a pilot interview confirmed clarity of wording and appropriate sequencing. Observation focused on classroom instruction, worship routines, and informal school interactions, recorded through structured field notes, while document analysis encompassed the school's curriculum documents, character-development program records, and student activity reports. Triangulation across these instruments strengthened the credibility of the emerging interpretation and mitigated the limitations inherent in any single source.

Data collection followed a sequenced procedure and observed established ethical safeguards. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and written informed consent was secured from all adult participants and from the guardians of student participants, who additionally provided assent; anonymity and the right to withdraw were guaranteed throughout. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for verification. All data were analyzed thematically following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, review, definition, and reporting, with coding managed in NVivo 14 to ensure systematic organization and an auditable analytic trail.

Trustworthiness was pursued through the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba. Credibility was established through methodological and data-source triangulation, prolonged engagement across the four-month fieldwork, and member checking of transcripts and preliminary interpretations. Transferability was supported by thick description of the setting and participants, enabling readers to judge applicability to comparable contexts. Dependability and confirmability were secured through a detailed audit trail documenting analytic decisions and through reflexive bracketing of the researchers' assumptions. These measures collectively enhanced the rigor and integrity of the findings while preserving fidelity to participants' accounts.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings in an integrated manner, organized around the two research questions. The analysis yielded four principal strategies through which PAI teachers enacted inclusion, together with a set of enabling and constraining conditions. Table 1 summarizes the participant profile, and Table 2 presents the thematic structure derived from the analysis. Findings are first reported with representative evidence and then interpreted in dialogue with the existing literature and the guiding theoretical framework.

Table 1. Profile of participating PAI teachers

Code	Sex	Experience (yrs)	Class taught	Special need in class
T1	F	12	Grade 4	Intellectual disability (mild)
T2	M	8	Grade 5	Hearing impairment
T3	F	6	Grade 3	Learning difficulty / slow learner

Code	Sex	Experience (yrs)	Class taught	Special need in class
T4	M	15	Grade 6	Physical / motor impairment

As shown in Table 1, the four participants collectively taught across the primary grade range and encountered a heterogeneous set of special needs, none of which was supported by a formally assigned shadow teacher. This heterogeneity is analytically significant because it meant that each teacher confronted distinct pedagogical demands, allowing the study to observe strategy variation across need types within a single institutional setting.

Table 2. Thematic structure of inclusive PAI strategies

Theme	Description	Illustrative codes
Differentiated & multisensory delivery	Adapting religious content through varied modalities	visual Qur'an aids; slowed pacing; gesture; repetition
Peer-mediated spiritual scaffolding	Enlisting classmates to support participation	buddy recitation; group <i>du'a</i> ; peer modelling
Affective relational accommodation	Value-based emotional support (<i>rahmah</i>)	patience; encouragement; individual attention
Improvised curricular modification	Informal adjustment of targets and tasks	simplified tasks; alternative assessment; flexible goals

Table 2 organizes the analysis into four themes that jointly answer the first research question. These themes were not discrete techniques applied in isolation but interdependent facets of a coherent, if unsystematic, inclusive practice. The following subsections examine each in turn. The first and most pervasive strategy was the differentiation of religious content through multiple sensory channels. Teachers adjusted pacing, repeated key material, and supplemented verbal instruction with visual and gestural cues so that learners with varied processing needs could access Qur'anic recitation, worship practices, and moral narratives. This adaptation was described as an intuitive response to observed difficulty rather than the execution of a planned differentiation scheme.

"If I only read the verse aloud, the child cannot follow. So I write it large on the board, I point to each word, I say it slowly, and I use my hands to show the meaning. I repeat until I see understanding in the eyes." (T1, interview)

Classroom observation corroborated these accounts, revealing consistent use of enlarged text, slowed enunciation, and gestural reinforcement. Interpreted through Universal Design for Learning, this strategy exemplifies the provision of multiple means of representation, whereby barriers are reduced by presenting content in more than one modality (Ok et al., 2021). The finding aligns with evidence that flexible, multimodal delivery supports diverse learners in mainstream classrooms (Woodcock et al., 2022). It departs, however, from the UDL literature's customary assumption of deliberate, pre-planned design: here differentiation was improvised in real time, suggesting that in resource-constrained settings UDL principles may surface as tacit craft knowledge rather than formal method. This nuance extends UDL theory by illustrating its emergence under conditions of scarcity.

A second strategy mobilized the peer group as a resource for inclusion. Teachers paired students with special needs with supportive classmates during recitation, memorization, and collective worship, thereby distributing instructional support and fostering belonging within the religious community of the classroom. This approach addressed both the pedagogical challenge of individual attention and the social goal of participation.

"I ask a friend to sit beside him and recite together. The other children are patient; they help him find the page, they wait for him. This is also teaching them the meaning of *ukhuwah*, brotherhood." (T2, interview)

This finding resonates with research demonstrating the efficacy of peer-mediated approaches for promoting participation and social inclusion (Muega & Echavia, 2021). Its distinctive feature in this context is its explicit theological framing: peer support was construed not merely as an instructional technique but as an enactment of Islamic fraternity, thereby fusing pedagogical and spiritual purposes. Whereas the mainstream literature theorizes peer support largely in cognitive and social terms, the present case reveals a value-mediated variant in which religious ethics supply the motivational grammar for inclusion. This observation substantiates the study's conceptual claim that inclusion in PAI operates through moral as well as technical means, and it points to an underexplored mechanism by which faith communities may sustain inclusive practice.

The third strategy centered on the affective and relational dimension of teaching. Participants repeatedly framed their inclusive efforts through the value of compassion (*rahmah*), emphasizing patience, encouragement, and individualized emotional attention as prerequisites for the participation of students with special needs. This relational accommodation was presented not as a soft supplement to instruction but as its foundation.

"These children need to feel that they are loved, that they belong here. If a child feels ashamed, he will not learn. My first duty is to make him comfortable, because *rahmah* is the heart of our religion." (T4, interview)

This emphasis converges with scholarship identifying teacher attitudes and the affective classroom climate as decisive conditions for inclusion (Saloviita, 2020; Yada et al., 2022). It diverges, however, in locating the wellspring of these dispositions in religious conviction rather than in professional training or policy compliance. Where much of the literature treats positive attitudes as an outcome to be cultivated through intervention, the present findings suggest that theological commitment can function as an intrinsic and durable source of inclusive disposition. Theoretically, this integrates the affective concerns of inclusion research with a faith-based ethics of care, indicating that in madrasah settings the moral resources of the tradition may partially compensate for the professional supports that are absent. This constitutes a substantive contribution to understanding how inclusive dispositions are generated and sustained.

The fourth strategy involved informal modification of curricular targets and tasks. In the absence of individualized education programs, teachers simplified assignments, adjusted memorization expectations, and devised alternative means of demonstrating learning so that students with special needs could experience achievement. These modifications were undocumented and self-authorized, reflecting professional judgement operating without formal scaffolding.

"There is no special curriculum for him. So I decide myself: instead of memorizing the whole surah, he memorizes the short verses, and I assess him by listening, not by writing. Officially there is nothing, but the child must still succeed." (T3, interview)

This pattern mirrors findings from other developing contexts where inclusion is realized through informal, teacher-initiated adaptation rather than mandated provision (Sharma et al., 2021; Muega & Echavia, 2021). It exposes a structural tension: teachers assumed responsibilities assessment redesign, target individualization that formal systems elsewhere assign to specialist support, yet they did so without training, recognition, or safeguards against inconsistency. Theoretically, this illuminates the limits of importing inclusion frameworks that presuppose institutional infrastructure into settings where such infrastructure is absent. The finding carries a clear policy implication: the invisible adaptive labor of madrasah teachers should be formalized, supported, and resourced rather than left to individual improvisation, lest inclusion remain contingent on personal goodwill.

Addressing the second research question, the analysis identified a configuration of factors that shaped strategy implementation. Enabling conditions were predominantly personal and communal: teachers' religious commitment, their long tenure and familiarity with pupils, and a supportive peer culture among students. Constraining conditions were predominantly structural: the absence of specialist training

in special needs pedagogy, the lack of shadow or accompanying teachers, minimal learning resources, and the non-existence of formal inclusion policy at the school level.

"I have never received training for teaching children like this. Whatever I do, I learned from experience and from my heart. If there were training, and if there were an assistant teacher, I could do much more." (T1, interview)

This asymmetry robust personal enablers set against pervasive structural constraints corroborates a consistent theme in the literature, namely that teacher willingness is necessary but insufficient without systemic support (Woodcock et al., 2022; Yada et al., 2022). The present case sharpens this insight by showing that where structural support is almost wholly absent, inclusion becomes entirely dependent on the discretionary commitment of individual teachers, rendering it fragile and unscalable. The practical and policy implications are direct: sustainable inclusion in madrasah settings requires investment in specialist teacher preparation, the provision of accompanying personnel, and the development of madrasah-specific inclusion policy. Absent such investment, the impressive resourcefulness documented here will remain a compensatory response to institutional neglect rather than evidence of a functioning inclusive system.

Read together, the four strategies and their surrounding conditions cohere into a distinctive model of inclusive practice that this study terms value-mediated inclusion. In this model, the technical elements familiar from mainstream inclusion research differentiation, peer support, scaffolding, and curricular modification are not free-standing methods but are animated, selected, and sustained by an underlying ethical commitment drawn from Islamic tradition. The value of *rahmah* functioned simultaneously as motivation, as justification, and as pedagogical orientation, shaping how teachers interpreted their obligations and how they improvised in the absence of formal guidance. This integrative reading advances the literature in two respects. First, it challenges the implicit secular framing of dominant inclusion theories by demonstrating that religious ethics can constitute a substantive engine of inclusive practice rather than a peripheral cultural backdrop (Krischler et al., 2019; Slee, 2019). Second, it reframes resource scarcity: while the absence of infrastructure unquestionably constrained practice, it also rendered visible the moral and relational foundations of inclusion that well-resourced systems may obscure behind procedure. The model thus contributes a conceptual vocabulary for analyzing inclusion in faith-based and low-resource settings, while cautioning that value-mediated inclusion, however admirable, cannot substitute indefinitely for the structural investment that equitable and sustainable provision ultimately requires.

Several limitations qualify these findings. As a single-case study of four teachers in one madrasah, the research prioritizes depth over breadth, and its conclusions are analytically rather than statistically generalizable; transferability must be judged by readers against their own contexts. Reliance on self-report and observation, though triangulated, cannot fully exclude social-desirability effects, and the three-month window captures a bounded temporal slice of practice. Finally, the study foregrounds teacher perspectives and does not directly represent the experiences of students with special needs or their families. These limitations delineate the boundaries of the claims advanced and motivate the future directions outlined below.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the strategies through which PAI teachers implement inclusive learning for students with special needs at MIN 2 Gayo Lues and to identify the conditions shaping those strategies. The analysis established that inclusion was enacted through four interdependent strategies differentiated and multisensory delivery, peer-mediated spiritual scaffolding, affective relational accommodation grounded in the value of *rahmah*, and improvised curricular modification sustained by teachers' religious commitment yet severely constrained by the absence of training, specialist personnel, and institutional policy. Inclusion at the school thus emerged as a resourceful but precarious accomplishment resting largely on individual moral conviction.

The scientific contribution of the study lies in demonstrating, through thick qualitative evidence, how inclusive practice is actually enacted in a faith-based, resource-constrained setting that the international literature has largely overlooked. Theoretically, it extends Universal Design for Learning by showing that its principles can surface as tacit craft under conditions of scarcity, and it advances the concept of value-mediated inclusion, in which theological ethics function as a generative source of inclusive disposition and practice. Practically, the findings supply an evidence base for madrasah-specific professional development that builds upon rather than bypasses teachers' existing moral resources. For policy, the study argues that the invisible adaptive labor of religious education teachers should be formalized through targeted training, the provision of accompanying teachers, and the articulation of inclusion policy tailored to madrasah contexts.

Future research should extend this inquiry through multi-site comparative designs across madrasah of differing capacity, incorporate the perspectives of students with special needs and their families, and pursue longitudinal examination of how inclusive practice develops as support structures evolve. Intervention studies testing whether faith-integrated professional development enhances inclusive practice would be especially valuable. By pursuing these directions, subsequent scholarship can consolidate and generalize the contextually grounded insights advanced here, and further theories the distinctive contribution of religious education to the global project of inclusion.

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