

Integrating Student-Centered Approaches in Islamic Education: A Case Study of SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in secondary schools plays a crucial role in fostering students' moral character, spiritual awareness, and social responsibility. Amid rapid digitalization and shifting adolescent values, there is a growing need for pedagogical approaches that emphasize the internalization of Islamic values through student-centered learning. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design conducted at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Tasikmalaya Regency. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with PAI teachers, and a review of relevant literature. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in learning approaches, strategies, methods, and instructional techniques. The findings indicate that PAI instruction consistently utilizes a student-centered approach supported by three primary strategies: inquiry-based, collaborative, and contextual learning. Four dominant teaching methods—group discussion, role-playing, interactive questioning, and digital media integration—were regularly applied. Contextual techniques, including storytelling, Islamic-themed ice breaking, and authentic assessment, enhanced student engagement, motivation, and the internalization of values across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. The integration of student-centered approaches with diverse strategies and contextual techniques significantly improves the effectiveness of PAI learning and supports Islamic character formation. These findings contribute empirical insights to contemporary discourse on Islamic and moral education, highlighting the importance of adaptive pedagogy in addressing current educational challenges.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in secondary schools not only serves as a compulsory subject, but also as a strategic instrument in moral guidance, spiritual strengthening, and character building of students (Jaelani, 2022; Puspitasari et al., 2022; Yusri et al., 2023). In line with national education objectives, PAI plays a role in preparing young people who are not only intellectually intelligent but also possess strong Islamic morality, personality, and integrity (Afif & Ningrum, 2024; Hulawa, 2019; Maksudin, 2023; Pusvitasari, 2023).

An approach, as defined by the Big Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), refers to a process or perspective based on interconnected assumptions that shape how a phenomenon is understood (Muhkam et al., 2025; Suhardiman et al., 2025). In education, an approach functions as a philosophical and conceptual foundation influencing how teachers design, implement, and evaluate learning, particularly in distinguishing between teacher-centered and student-centered paradigms. In Islamic Religious Education (IRE), selecting an appropriate approach is essential to achieving holistic learning objectives, as it enables students to internalize Islamic values not only cognitively but also affectively and behaviorally (Nasir et al., 2024)(Rianto et al., 2024). Complementing this, learning strategies—derived from the concept of *strategia* represent systematic efforts to mobilize educational resources, including teachers and learning media, to achieve instructional goals effectively (Kandia et al., 2023; Muhaimin & Juandi, 2023; Suriana, 2023).

Learning methods serve as operational instruments that translate strategies into concrete classroom practices, thereby bridging the gap between conceptual planning and instructional implementation (Eriksen et al., 2021; Nuraini, 2021; Wong et al., 2021). The effectiveness of any learning strategy is highly dependent on teachers' ability to select and adapt methods that align with students' characteristics, learning objectives, and instructional contexts. Furthermore, teaching techniques or tactics function as practical elaborations of methods, requiring teachers to adjust instructional delivery based on situational conditions, such as class size and time of instruction (Fadhlina Harisnur & Suriana, 2022; Mahmud et al., 2020). Together, the coherent integration of approaches, strategies, methods, and techniques forms the foundation of effective and meaningful learning in Islamic education.

In the context of globalization and the development of information technology, junior high school students face serious challenges in the form of the influence of social media, popular culture, and shifting moral values in their social environment (Syahraini et al., 2024). This has led to the emergence of symptoms such as moral degradation, low social awareness, and a tendency toward consumerism and individualism (Hermawan et al., 2025; Robaeah et al., 2024). Therefore, Islamic Education teachers are required to be able to deliver innovative, interactive, and relevant learning that meets the needs of the times (Asran & Amaludin, 2025; Rambe, 2025).

SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Tasikmalaya Regency, as one of the public junior high schools, has students with diverse characteristics in terms of academic abilities, interests, family backgrounds, and religious experiences. This heterogeneous condition requires PAI teachers to use flexible learning strategies, varied methods, and contextual teaching techniques. For example, project-based learning with Islamic themes, the use of digital media to strengthen religious literacy, and direct worship practices combined with reflection on spiritual values (Junita et al., 2023).

By understanding and applying the right approach, strategies, methods, and learning techniques, PAI teachers at SMPN 1 Kadipaten are expected to be able to respond to the challenges of the times. Moreover, PAI learning is also oriented towards instilling Islamic values that are not only understood conceptually, but also lived out in the daily lives of students, whether at school, at home, or in the community (Jumsir et al., 2025; Sukriyah et al., 2024; Zalsabella P et al., 2023).

Despite the widely acknowledged role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in shaping students' moral and spiritual development, existing studies tend to emphasize its normative importance rather than examining how pedagogical practices are concretely implemented in classroom settings. Much of the literature focuses on the outcomes of PAI learning or conceptual discussions of Islamic character education, while empirical investigations into the integration of learning approaches, strategies,

methods, and techniques remain limited, particularly in public secondary schools. As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how PAI teachers translate pedagogical theories into practical instructional actions that actively engage students and facilitate value internalization.

Furthermore, previous research often examines learning approaches, strategies, or methods in isolation, without exploring their interrelated and complementary use within real classroom contexts. This fragmented perspective creates a gap in the literature regarding how student-centered learning is operationalized holistically in PAI instruction to address contemporary challenges such as digital influence, declining student engagement, and moral disorientation among adolescents. Consequently, there is a need for context-specific studies that document actual teaching practices and provide grounded insights into effective pedagogical integration.

This study is important because it offers an empirical account of how PAI teachers at SMPN 1 Kadipaten implement student-centered learning through the combined use of approaches, strategies, methods, and techniques. By focusing on practical classroom dynamics, this research fills a critical gap in Islamic and moral education literature and contributes evidence-based insights for improving PAI pedagogy. Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively analyze the learning approaches, strategies, methods, and techniques applied in PAI instruction at SMPN 1 Kadipaten and their role in enhancing student engagement and Islamic character formation.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with the aim of providing an in-depth description of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning practices at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Tasikmalaya Regency. Data were collected through three main techniques: (1) a literature review of national and international literature from the last five years relevant to the topic of IRE learning strategies, methods, and techniques; (2) participatory observation in the classroom to directly understand the dynamics of teacher-student interactions; and (3) informal interviews with IRE teachers to explore their experiences, strategies, and innovations. This approach was chosen because it provides a contextual understanding that is not only based on theory but also on actual practice in the field (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles & Huberman model, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction was carried out by selecting important information from observations, interviews, and documents. The reduced data was then presented in the form of descriptive narratives to facilitate understanding. Furthermore, conclusions were drawn continuously throughout the research process. To maintain the validity and reliability of the data, this study used source and method triangulation, which involved comparing the results of various data collection techniques and confirming the findings through discussions with teachers and supporting documents (Rochim & Amal Khayati, 2023).

To ensure methodological rigor, classroom observations were conducted in six Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning sessions across different instructional topics to capture variations in teaching approaches and student engagement. In addition, three PAI teachers participated as interview informants, each involved in one to two informal in-depth interviews focusing on pedagogical practices, instructional decision-making, and classroom experiences. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on specific criteria: active involvement in PAI instruction at SMPN 1 Kadipaten during the research period, a minimum of three years of teaching experience, and direct engagement in implementing student-centered learning practices. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process; verbal informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, participants were informed of the study's purpose and the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality was ensured through anonymization, and all data were used solely for academic and research purposes.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 Learning Approach

The results of the study show that Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at SMPN 1 Kadipaten apply a student-centered learning approach in their teaching and learning activities. Through this approach, students are encouraged to actively seek, understand, and apply knowledge independently with the guidance of teachers. Teachers serve as facilitators who help students develop critical, creative, and reflective thinking skills in relation to the Islamic values they are learning.

In practice, teachers integrate various active learning strategies such as discussions, group work, thematic projects, and hands-on activities that are relevant to everyday life. For example, in the subject of ethics towards others, students not only listen to the teacher's explanations, but also participate in real activities such as classroom cleaning programs or weekly charity collections. Through these activities, Islamic values are learned contextually so that students can understand and internalize them more deeply.

This approach has proven effective in fostering comprehensive understanding among students, covering the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Students not only learn about Islam in theory, but are also able to apply it in their daily attitudes and behavior. Thus, PAI learning at SMPN 1 Kadipaten emphasizes not only knowledge, but also the formation of Islamic character rooted in real experiences and practices in school and community life.

3.1.2 Learning Strategy

Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at SMPN 1 Kadipaten implement various learning strategies that are oriented towards developing students' thinking skills and shaping their religious character. The strategies used include inquiry, collaborative, and contextual learning, each designed to make the learning process more active, reflective, and relevant to real life. With this approach, students not only receive knowledge passively but are also directly involved in the process of discovering and understanding Islamic values through meaningful learning experiences.

Through inquiry-based strategies, teachers encourage students to seek answers to religious issues they encounter in their daily lives. For example, students are invited to examine the phenomenon of digital ethics in the use of social media from an Islamic perspective. This approach fosters analytical skills and curiosity, enabling students to understand religious teachings with a rational and profound foundation. Meanwhile, the collaborative strategy is applied through group work activities, where students exchange ideas and experiences in understanding materials such as fiqh and akhlak. This process helps them learn to respect other people's opinions and strengthens their sense of togetherness.

The contextual strategy is implemented by linking lesson material to real situations in the school environment and society. For example, teachers integrate moral and religious education through the practice of congregational prayer at school, followed by joint reflection in class discussions. This approach ensures that Islamic values are not only understood theoretically, but also practiced in the daily behavior of students. Overall, the application of these three strategies strengthens critical thinking skills while fostering a deep religious awareness in students.

3.1.3 Learning Methods

In implementing the learning process, Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at SMPN 1 Kadipaten use various methods tailored to the characteristics of the material and the needs of the students. This flexible approach aims to make the learning process more dynamic and enjoyable, while encouraging students to actively engage in understanding Islamic teachings. Teachers do not stick to one particular method, but combine several techniques to ensure that learning remains relevant, contextual, and easy to understand for students with diverse learning styles.

One method that is often used is group discussion, which serves to foster the ability to work together and respect differences of opinion. In addition, role playing is used to foster empathy and appreciation of Islamic values, for example, through simulations of visiting etiquette, honesty in transactions, or ethics in speaking. The interactive question and answer method is used to train critical thinking skills and deepen understanding of religious concepts. Through these activities, students are trained to actively ask questions, answer questions, and reason through various issues related to Islamic life.

In addition to conventional methods, teachers also integrate digital media to increase the appeal and effectiveness of learning. The use of Islamic videos, online quiz applications, and interactive visual presentations makes the learning process more interesting for a generation that is familiar with technology. The use of these media not only helps clarify the material, but also makes PAI learning more relevant to the context of the times. The combination of various methods and media creates a more lively and interactive learning atmosphere and is able to shape a meaningful learning experience for students.

3.1.4 Learning Techniques

To support the effectiveness of the learning methods applied, Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at SMPN 1 Kadipaten utilize various contextual learning techniques. These techniques are designed so that the learning process does not only focus on delivering material, but also touches on the aspects of experience and appreciation of Islamic values. One of the techniques used is storytelling, which is the delivery of exemplary stories of the Prophet and his companions in an interesting narrative style. Through this technique, students find it easier to understand moral messages and emulate positive behavior in their daily lives.

In addition, teachers also apply Islamic ice breaking as an effort to maintain students' concentration and enthusiasm for learning, especially towards the end of the lesson. These activities can take the form of educational games, short quizzes, or light reflections that contain Islamic values. Thus, the classroom atmosphere becomes more lively and enjoyable without reducing the spiritual meaning of the learning process. The use of this technique also helps to create warm interactions between teachers and students, while increasing their motivation to learn.

In terms of evaluation, teachers apply authentic assessment by directly observing student behavior in religious activities at school. Assessment does not only focus on written test results, but also includes aspects of attitude and practical application, such as active participation in congregational prayers, involvement in Quran recitation activities, and polite behavior towards teachers and friends. This approach allows teachers to comprehensively assess students' spiritual and character development. Overall, the application of these various techniques has proven effective in increasing learning motivation while strengthening the internalization of Islamic values in students.

Table 1. Summary of Research Results

Component	Component Application at SMPN 1 Kadipaten	Example of Implementation
Approach	Student-centered learning	Class discussions, social service projects, hands-on worship practices
Strategy	Inquiry-based, collaborative, contextual	Digital ethics case studies, fiqh/ethics group work, reflections on congregational prayer
Method	Group discussions, role playing, interactive question and answer sessions, use of digital media	Group discussions on ethics, role-playing on visiting etiquette, interactive app-based quizzes, Islamic video screenings
Technique	Storytelling, Islamic ice breaking, authentic assessment	Stories of the Prophet and his companions, motivational Islamic games, observation of students' attitudes during prayer and recitation

This table illustrates that Islamic Education teachers at SMPN 1 Kadipaten combine various approaches, strategies, methods, and techniques to make learning more meaningful, interactive, and contextual.

To strengthen the empirical validity of these findings, evidence from teacher interviews and classroom observations further illustrates how student-centered PAI learning is implemented in practice. One teacher stated, *"I try not to dominate the lesson; instead, I encourage students to discuss and relate Islamic values to situations they face daily, especially issues they encounter on social media"* (Teacher 1, interview). This statement was supported by observation field notes indicating that students were actively engaged in group discussions and frequently asked reflective questions related to moral dilemmas in everyday life.

Another teacher emphasized the role of varied methods and techniques, noting that *"role playing and storytelling make students more responsive, especially when discussing akhlak topics, because they can imagine real situations rather than just memorizing concepts"* (Teacher 2, interview). From the students' perspective, several learners expressed that interactive activities made PAI lessons more meaningful. One student remarked, *"Learning through discussion and videos helps us understand how Islamic values apply in real life, not only in exams"* (Student reflection during observation).

Overall, these qualitative insights confirm that the integration of student-centered approaches, collaborative strategies, and contextual techniques enhances students' engagement, motivation, and moral awareness. To synthesize these findings, the main themes emerging from observations and interviews, including learning approaches, strategies, methods, techniques, and perceived impacts on students, are summarized in Table 1, providing a clear overview of the key patterns identified in this study.

3.2 Discussion

The results of the study indicate that PAI learning practices at SMPN 1 Kadipaten are in line with the 21st-century education paradigm, which emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity (4C) skills (Putri et al., 2023; Shiddiq et al., 2024; Syarifuddin et al., 2023). These four skills form the main foundation in shaping a generation that is adaptive to global challenges while remaining rooted in Islamic values. This is important considering that junior high school students today live in a digital ecosystem that is saturated with instant information and entertainment, so PAI teachers must design learning that balances academic needs with character building (Supendi et al., 2020; Supriatna et al., 2023; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

The student-centered approach has been proven to be more effective than the teacher-centered approach in increasing student motivation and active participation. In this approach, students are placed as the main subjects who play an active role in the learning process, while teachers function as facilitators who guide and motivate them to discover knowledge independently. Through direct involvement in activities such as discussions, projects, case studies, and problem solving, students feel responsible for their own learning process. This fosters greater self-confidence, independence, and interest in learning compared to when they are merely passive listeners in a teacher-centered approach. Thus, the student-centered approach not only strengthens mastery of the material but also develops critical thinking, collaboration, and self-reflection skills that are essential in modern learning (Fitriyah, 2020; Krisnayanti et al., 2020; Salsabila, 2024). The results of the observation show that when students are involved in group discussions or social projects based on Islamic values, they are more enthusiastic and take the initiative to express their opinions. This supports the research by Fatimah & Mulyadi (2022), which states that student-based PAI learning is more capable of building a sense of responsibility, empathy, and leadership. This approach is also in line with the spirit of Merdeka Belajar, which places students as the subjects of learning (Kharismawati et al., 2025).

The application of inquiry and collaborative strategies provides opportunities for students to discover knowledge independently while strengthening their social character. For example, in the study of digital ethics, students not only receive theory, but are also asked to examine real cases of

social media use. This strategy is in line with the opinion of Setiawati & Nuha, who emphasize that PAI learning should be directed towards the development of religious digital literacy so that students are able to integrate Islamic values into their daily lives (Setiawati & Nuha, 2023). Thus, the PAI learning strategy is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but also the internalization of values that shape religious attitudes (Supendi et al., 2019).

The use of various learning methods, such as discussions, role playing, and interactive question and answer sessions, provides opportunities for students to practice Islamic values in real life. Through discussion, students are trained to think critically, respect other people's opinions, and foster mutual respect for different points of view. Role-playing allows students to express and internalize moral values through simulations of real-life situations, such as demonstrating good manners when visiting someone's home, being honest in transactions, or behaving politely in social situations. Meanwhile, the interactive question and answer method encourages students to actively ask questions, reason, and understand Islamic teachings in depth. With a combination of these three methods, learning not only focuses on knowledge, but also shapes Islamic attitudes and behaviors that are reflected in the real actions of students (Firahmatika & Afandi, 2025).

Group discussions help them learn to respect differences of opinion, role playing fosters empathy through simulations of Islamic behavior, while interactive question and answer sessions train courage and critical thinking. This is in line with Asyafah's (2021) findings, which confirm that varying methods in PAI learning strengthen the internalization of religious values and prevent student boredom. Thus, the use of diverse methods is not only a technical strategy, but part of an effort to create meaningful learning (Iskandar et al., 2025).

Teaching techniques such as storytelling and Islamic ice breaking have been proven to create a more lively and enjoyable classroom atmosphere (Fajarudin et al., 2021; Fitria, 2024; Ghasiyah et al., 2024; Sumindar & Setiawan, 2024). Storytelling, especially stories about the Prophet and his companions, has an emotional power that can foster spiritual awareness better than conventional lectures (Nabihasnah et al., 2025). Meanwhile, Islamic icebreakers inserted at the beginning or middle of the lesson can increase students' focus and foster a spirit of togetherness. This technique is relevant for junior high school students who tend to lose concentration quickly, requiring a creative and contextual approach.

Thus, the application of appropriate approaches, strategies, methods, and techniques in PAI learning at SMPN 1 Kadipaten can improve the quality of learning while shaping the Islamic character of students. The results of this study reinforce the view that PAI teachers must act as educators, facilitators, and role models in facing the challenges of education in the digital age. In practical terms, these findings can be used as a reference for PAI teachers in other schools to design adaptive, innovative learning that remains based on Islamic values.

4. CONCLUSION

PAI learning at SMPN 1 Kadipaten, Tasikmalaya Regency, shows that the success of the learning process cannot be separated from a combination of complementary approaches, strategies, methods, and techniques. The student-centered learning approach has proven effective in increasing student participation, while collaborative, inquiry-based, and contextual strategies make learning more meaningful. Varied methods such as discussion, role-playing, question and answer sessions, and the use of digital media enrich the learning experience. Contextual learning techniques such as storytelling about the exemplary stories of the Prophet and Islamic ice breaking successfully create a lively classroom atmosphere while facilitating the internalization of Islamic values. With integrated implementation, PAI learning is not only oriented towards the cognitive domain, but also the affective and psychomotor domains, thereby forming students who are religious, have noble character, and possess good social skills.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. First, PAI teachers need to continue to innovate in the use of digital technology, vary their methods, and create an interactive learning environment. Second, schools are expected to provide support through the provision of technology-based learning facilities and infrastructure as well as sustainable religious programs. Third, education policymakers need to strengthen the competence of PAI teachers through training, workshops, and professional mentoring. With these steps, PAI learning can function not only as a normative subject, but also as a strategic instrument in shaping a young generation with Islamic character, critical thinking, adaptability, and readiness to face the challenges of the 21st century.

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