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Learning Difficulties in Islamic Religious Education Among Elementary School Students: Experiences, Impacts, and Teacher Support

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ABSTRACT

Learning difficulties in Islamic Religious Education can restrict students' access to Arabic-script materials, reduce classroom participation, and affect their confidence. This study aimed to examine the forms, perceived contributing factors, and consequences of these difficulties, as well as the instructional support provided by teachers. A qualitative descriptive design was employed involving 22 participants from 11 public elementary schools in Kemuning District, Palembang, Indonesia: 11 fifth-grade students experiencing persistent difficulties in Islamic Religious Education and 11 certified teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, teacher learning notes, student reflections, and relevant academic documents, and were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Five themes were identified: Arabic literacy as a gateway barrier, mismatch between students' processing pace and classroom demands, emotional and social consequences of repeated difficulty, limited support outside school, and adaptive teacher support. Students reported difficulties recognizing and writing *Hijaiyah* letters, retaining memorized material, completing tasks at the expected pace, and participating confidently in class. Teachers responded through individualized guidance, chunking, slower instructional pacing, auditory and narrative supports, repetition, and positive reinforcement, which participants perceived as helpful. The findings indicate that learning difficulties in Islamic Religious Education are shaped by the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, emotional, instructional, and environmental conditions. Inclusive practice therefore requires gradual instructional sequencing, emotionally safe classrooms, and stronger collaboration between schools and families.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Students experiencing learning difficulties in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in elementary schools face various cognitive, linguistic, and psychosocial challenges that often do not receive optimal attention in teaching practices. This well-being is not only evident in poor learning outcomes, but also in slow assignment completion, difficulty understanding material, low self-confidence, and the emergence of various social and emotional behaviours that hinder the learning process. This condition is important to examine because Islamic Religious Education is a subject with unique characteristics compared to other subjects.

Islamic Religious Education is a conscious effort to prepare students to believe in, understand, internalize, and practice Islamic teachings through guidance, teaching, and training (Hawi, 2014). The ultimate goal of Islamic religious education is to develop individuals who are faithful, pious, knowledgeable, and capable of devoting themselves to Allah SWT in all aspects of life (Arifin, 2014). To achieve this goal, students are required not only to understand religious concepts but also to internalize and practice them in their daily lives.

In practice, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) presents unique challenges for students experiencing learning difficulties. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) materials are presented in Arabic and Indonesian. The Arabic language covers the Arabic language itself, while the Indonesian language covers the Qur'an and Hadith, the Creed, Morals, Fiqh, and Islamic Cultural History. These materials require the ability to read Arabic script, understand religious concepts, memorize prayers, understand the pillars of Islam and the pillars of faith, and recall various Islamic historical events. These demands become more complex for students who experience difficulties receiving, understanding, and processing learning information.

Learning difficulties are a condition in which students are unable to cope with the demands of the learning process, resulting in unsatisfactory learning outcomes (Surya et al., 2018). Learning difficulties can occur in receiving, absorbing, or both. Symptoms of learning difficulties can be demonstrated by students' inability to achieve expected outcomes, failing to achieve the required level of mastery of the material, and failing to master prerequisite material for subsequent learning. Students with these characteristics can be classified as slow learners and therefore require special attention and assistance in the learning process (Kurniawan, 2025).

Slow learners are students who learn more slowly than their peers and require additional time, repetition, and instructional support to achieve academic mastery while remaining capable of participating in regular classrooms (Kirk et al., 1989). They often experience difficulties in information processing, memory, attention, comprehension, and concept application, resulting in lower academic achievement (Lenhard & Lenhard, 2013). In Islamic Religious Education (PAI), these challenges affect students' ability to read *Hijaiyah* letters, understand Arabic texts, memorize prayers, and grasp abstract religious concepts. In this study, slow learners were identified through classroom observations, teacher reports, academic records below the KKM, and observable learning difficulties (Ford, 2013; Seliane & Kgothule, 2022).

Based on initial observations at eleven public elementary schools in Kemuning District, Palembang City, a number of fifth-grade students exhibited characteristics of learning difficulties in Islamic Religious Education. These difficulties were evident in the slow completion of learning assignments, particularly in activities requiring concentration and memorization, such as memorizing prayers. Furthermore, some students exhibited behaviours that hindered the learning process, such as truancy, arriving late, not completing assignments, isolating themselves, lacking the ability to work collaboratively, and having low self-confidence. Some students also exhibit unusual emotional symptoms, such as frequent moodiness, irritability, lack of enthusiasm for learning, feelings of isolation, and difficulty adapting to social environments. According to Islamic Education teachers, these conditions are related to problems with concentration, discipline, social factors, and low motivation and self-confidence, which ultimately impact students' academic success.

These findings are supported by data on fifth-grade student learning outcomes at eleven public elementary schools in Kemuning District. Of the 821 students, 63 (7.68%) scored below the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM) of 75 in Islamic Religious Education. The lowest score achieved by a student was 20, while the class average was 72. These data indicate that a number of students still experience difficulties in achieving the competencies set in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning. Interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers indicate that low student learning outcomes are influenced by various factors. Some students struggle to understand abstract material that requires deep understanding, such as prayers, the pillars of Islam, morals, the history of the prophets, and Islamic jurisprudence. Furthermore, some students, despite diligent study efforts, still achieve low scores due to inappropriate learning strategies, anxiety during study and exams, and low self-confidence.

Extensive research on learning difficulties has been conducted. Research by Gabriel and Bornert-Ringleb (2023) focused on the relationship between learning difficulties and behavioural problems. Swlikowitz's (2021) study examined learning difficulties in children with ADHD. Kramer et al., (2021) study examined the cognitive and psychosocial outcomes of students with learning difficulties in inclusive education. Akla & Hardiansyah (2023) study examined Arabic learning difficulties through behavioural counselling. Meanwhile, Löper and Hellmich's (2024) study highlighted the role of teacher behaviour and teacher-student relationships in student attitudes toward peers with learning difficulties.

However, these studies have not specifically examined the phenomenon of students experiencing learning difficulties in Islamic Religious Education (ISE) lessons in public elementary schools, particularly students who exhibit slow learning characteristics in understanding and processing Islamic Religious Education (ISE) material. Furthermore, previous research has focused more on behavioural aspects, inclusive education, ADHD, and Arabic language learning in general, while studies on the types of learning difficulties, their causes, impacts, and teachers' efforts to address them in Islamic Religious Education (ISE) are still limited. Based on these conditions, this research is important to be conducted to describe and analyse the types of learning difficulties experienced by students, the causal factors, the impacts they cause, and the efforts of teachers in overcoming students' learning difficulties in Islamic Religious Education learning at State Elementary Schools in Kemuning District, Palembang City.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the forms, perceived contributing factors, and consequences of students' learning difficulties in Islamic Religious Education, as well as the instructional support provided by teachers. A qualitative descriptive design was selected because the study sought to produce a comprehensive account of participants' experiences and perspectives without imposing a diagnostic or highly interpretative phenomenological framework (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The study focused on students who experienced persistent difficulties in accessing Islamic Religious Education content, particularly in reading and writing Arabic script, memorizing religious materials, processing instructional information, and completing classroom tasks. Rather than treating the students as having a formally diagnosed cognitive condition, the study examined learning difficulties as they were experienced by students and observed by their teachers within regular elementary school classrooms.

The research was conducted in January 2025 at 11 public elementary schools in Kemuning District, Palembang, Indonesia.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. The study involved 22 participants, comprising 11 fifth-grade students who experienced persistent difficulties in Islamic Religious Education and 11 certified Islamic Religious Education teachers.

Student participants were selected based on several criteria: they were enrolled in Grade 5; had obtained Islamic Religious Education scores below the school's minimum mastery criterion; were identified by their teachers as experiencing persistent difficulties in understanding, retaining, or completing Islamic Religious Education learning activities; and required repeated or individualized instructional support. Observable learning difficulties included problems recognizing and pronouncing Hijaiyah letters, writing Arabic script, memorizing prayers or the Asmaul Husna, following classroom explanations, and completing assignments within the expected time.

Teacher participants were required to be certified Islamic Religious Education teachers who directly taught or supported the participating students and had sufficient knowledge of their academic progress and classroom behavior. Teachers were included as complementary informants to provide contextual information regarding students' learning characteristics, classroom participation, instructional needs, and responses to teacher support.

Participation was voluntary. Students were included only after permission was obtained from their parents or legal guardians and after the students provided age-appropriate assent. Participants were informed that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect students' grades, school services, or relationships with their teachers.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, teacher learning notes, student reflection notes, and relevant school documents. The use of multiple data sources enabled the researchers to examine students' learning difficulties from both student and teacher perspectives and to compare participants' accounts with available academic records.

Semi-structured interviews with students focused on their experiences in Islamic Religious Education lessons, including the material they found difficult, their experiences when reading or writing Arabic script, their ability to memorize religious content, their participation in classroom activities, their emotional responses to learning difficulties, and the forms of teacher or family support they received. The questions were delivered using age-appropriate language, and follow-up questions were used to clarify the students' responses.

Teacher interviews explored the observable characteristics of students' learning difficulties, possible contributing conditions, the academic and psychosocial consequences of these difficulties, and the instructional strategies used to support students. Teachers were also asked to describe students' progress, engagement, classroom behavior, and responses to strategies such as repetition, individualized guidance, slower instructional pacing, auditory learning materials, and positive reinforcement.

With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed during transcription, and participants were assigned codes or pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Where audio recording was not permitted, detailed interview notes were prepared immediately after the interview.

Teacher learning notes and student reflection notes were used to obtain additional information about everyday learning experiences. Teacher notes documented students' difficulties in reading, writing, memorizing, maintaining attention, completing tasks, and participating in classroom activities. Student reflections provided brief accounts of the difficulties they experienced, how they felt during learning activities, and the forms of assistance they considered helpful.

Secondary data were obtained from school documents, including Islamic Religious Education grades, student progress notes, and relevant curriculum documents. These records were not used to

diagnose students but to provide contextual evidence regarding their academic performance and learning support needs.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the six-phase procedure developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was primarily inductive and semantic, meaning that codes and themes were developed from participants' explicit accounts while remaining guided by the study objectives.

First, the researchers became familiar with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, teacher notes, student reflections, and relevant school documents. Initial observations and potentially meaningful patterns were recorded during this stage.

Second, the data were systematically coded. Codes were assigned to excerpts related to difficulties in Arabic literacy, memory and information retention, classroom pacing, task completion, emotional responses, classroom participation, home learning conditions, digital distractions, and teacher support.

Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. For example, codes concerning confusion between similar Hijaiyah letters, pronunciation errors, and difficulties writing Arabic script were grouped under a broader theme related to Arabic literacy barriers. Codes concerning embarrassment, fear of making mistakes, silence, and reduced classroom participation were grouped under a theme concerning the emotional and social consequences of learning difficulties.

Fourth, the candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the complete dataset. Themes were revised, combined, or separated to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes.

Fifth, each theme was defined and named to reflect its central meaning. The final thematic structure comprised: (1) Arabic literacy as a gateway barrier to Islamic Religious Education content; (2) mismatch between students' processing pace and classroom demands; (3) emotional and social consequences of repeated learning difficulties; (4) environmental conditions that sustained learning difficulties; and (5) adaptive instructional support provided by teachers.

Sixth, the findings were presented as an analytical narrative supported by selected quotations from students and teachers. Quotations were selected based on their relevance and their ability to represent recurring patterns or meaningful variations in participants' experiences. Student and teacher perspectives were compared to identify areas of convergence and differences in how learning difficulties were perceived.

2.5. Trustworthiness

Several procedures were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from students, teachers, learning notes, and academic documents (Denzin, 2012). This process helped the researchers determine whether similar patterns appeared across different participants and data sources.

Member checking was conducted by confirming the main points of the interview data and preliminary interpretations with relevant participants. Because the student participants were children, confirmation was conducted using simple and age-appropriate language. Teachers were also asked to clarify interpretations concerning students' learning behaviors and the instructional support provided.

Peer debriefing was undertaken through discussions with supervisors or research colleagues. These discussions were used to critically examine the coding process, thematic structure, possible researcher assumptions, and alternative interpretations of the data. The researchers also repeatedly reviewed the original data to ensure that the reported themes remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than relying solely on theoretical assumptions.

The study did not use psychological or cognitive instruments to diagnose working-memory limitations, self-efficacy, learned helplessness, or other psychological conditions. Therefore, such

concepts were used cautiously as theoretical interpretations in the discussion rather than as clinical diagnoses or directly measured participant characteristics.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Types of Student Learning Difficulties

The theme of cognitive limitations and memory retention indicates that students experience significant difficulties in remembering and retaining Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning information. Interviews and diary entries revealed difficulties memorizing material such as the *Asmaul Husna* (The Names of Allah), due to the large number of names and their rapid forgetting. This is evident in AAS's statement:

> *"I find it difficult to remember the Asmaul Husna because there are so many, and some names have difficult pronunciations."*

AA also stated:
"I enjoy participating in the lessons, but I have difficulty memorizing the Asmaul Husna because there are so many. As a result, I often forget and can't remember them well during tests."

Teachers also validated this situation, as expressed by Mrs. N:
"According to the teacher, some students still score below the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM) because they have difficulty remembering the meaning of the Asmaul Husna, despite repeated learning and review of the material."

Teachers' diaries indicate that this memory deficit is exacerbated by technical difficulties in reading, writing, and Arabic script. Students often experience errors in reading the *Hijaiyah* letters, their writing is messy, and they have difficulty memorizing the order of verses, as expressed by Ms. LD and SFC:
"Students still have difficulty reading the Hijaiyah letters, which is indicated by frequently reversing or missing some letters. Students also have difficulty memorizing and their writing is messy, making it difficult to read."

This is also felt by students, as expressed by SFS:
"I have difficulty memorizing the Asmaul Husna because there are so many of them, and I don't fully understand their meanings."

Other statements by MIA, SH, RC, and ABS include difficulties reading, writing, and understanding verses because they use Arabic letters. This condition indicates that weak basic literacy directly impacts long-term memory retention. Furthermore, Arabic literacy challenges are a dominant factor that exacerbates the learning difficulties of slow learners. Observations show that students often mis differentiate the phonemes of the *Hijaiyah* letters, as expressed by Mr. BH:

> *"Student MR has difficulty reading Surah Al-Ma'un, as indicated by errors in pronouncing the letters ا (alif) and ع ('ain). The teacher needs to provide a lot of guidance and guidance three times until the student can pronounce these letters correctly."*

From the students' perspective, they acknowledged these difficulties, as expressed by AA:

> *"I find it difficult to learn Islamic Religious Education (PAI) because the memorization material is quite long and difficult to remember. Furthermore, I often make mistakes when reading or writing Arabic letters because some letters are sometimes mixed up or reversed.*

Teachers also emphasized that this limitation impacts academic performance, as expressed by Mrs. N:

"Yes, there are some students who score below the Minimum Completion (KKM) because they often forget the meaning of the Asmaul Husna even though the material has been repeated many times."

Overall, these findings indicate that slow learners' cognitive difficulties are not only related to memory but are also influenced by weak Arabic literacy, which is fundamental to understanding Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material. Barriers to Arabic literacy in slow learners are also strongly influenced by external factors, particularly digital distractions that disrupt focus and consistency in learning. Various interviews revealed the dominance of gadget and television use over learning activities, as stated by AA:

"Often, Ma'am. I watch more television, so I have less time to study. I have to read books more often and not play with my cell phone so much."

This statement was also confirmed by AAS, II, ABS, SFS, SH, and SA. In reality, these distractions impact poor retention, as expressed by Mrs. N:

"Students easily lose focus while studying, quickly forget verses they have learned, and their Arabic writing is messy."

This suggests that the lack of repetition due to digital distractions keeps the material unfamiliar and doesn't stick in their memory. Furthermore, the lack of home support exacerbates students' learning barriers. Interviews revealed the pressure of not having support, as expressed by MA:

"I feel embarrassed, Ma, because I feel uncomfortable with my friends. I'm also afraid of being scolded by my parents. As a result, I lose enthusiasm because sometimes I still don't understand the material being studied."

Teachers confirmed that schools must address this gap through additional interventions, as expressed by Mrs. LD:

"Providing positive reinforcement in the form of praise and motivation to make students feel more confident, as well as providing advice to encourage students to study more diligently at home."

Research findings indicate that the learning difficulties experienced by students in Islamic Religious Education are dominated by Arabic literacy barriers, limited memory retention, and slow information processing. Students have difficulty accurately recognizing, reading, and writing the *Hijaiyah* letters, characterized by frequent confusion in the form and pronunciation of Arabic letters, as well as difficulty understanding verses and materials using Arabic script. These obstacles are exacerbated by limited long-term memory, making it difficult for students to memorize material such as the *Asmaul Husna*, prayers, and verses from the Quran, even after repeated repetition. These findings indicate that students face challenges not only in information storage but also in symbol recognition and understanding the material. This situation aligns with the discussion section, which emphasized that weak working memory and low Arabic literacy increase students' cognitive load, quickly overwhelming their mental capacity before information can be optimally stored in long-term memory.

3.2. Causes of Learning Difficulties

The barriers to self-regulation and work performance in slow-learning students are evident in their slow processing of information, which makes it difficult for them to keep up with the pace of learning. In interviews, students frankly acknowledged this limitation, as AA stated:

"Yes, ma'am. I'm often late completing assignments because I can't think quickly."

This was also confirmed by another student, AAS:

"Often, ma'am. I'm often late handing in assignments. Sometimes the assignments aren't finished, and sometimes I'm confused about how to do them. As a result, I'm often slower than my friends."

This barrier becomes even more complex when dealing with Arabic literacy, as recorded in a teacher's diary:

"The student writes Quranic verses slowly and often makes mistakes in forming the letters. In addition, the student often makes mistakes or misses some Hijaiyah letters when reading."

The teacher also confirmed the disparity in work speed, as expressed by Mrs. M:

"Slow-learning students usually take longer to write or copy the names of Allah. When other students have finished copying ten names, she can sometimes only copy five."

From a student perspective, the impact is immediately felt on the learning process, as expressed by AAS:

"I don't have time to take notes on the material being taught. I wish the teacher could explain and repeat the lesson more slowly so it's easier for me to understand and take notes."

This situation indicates a build-up of cognitive load, leading to delays in completing assignments and feelings of inferiority. Furthermore, there is an anomaly in learning effectiveness, namely a gap between learning effort and results. Although students demonstrate a willingness to learn, academic performance remains low due to cognitive limitations and Arabic literacy barriers. Mrs. LD described that:

"Students demonstrate a willingness to participate in learning by attempting to read verses from the Quran, even though their pronunciation is still stuttering. Students also persist in reading the given verses, even though they require repeated repetition. However, students still experience difficulty reading the Hijaiyah letters, as indicated by frequently mixing up the letter shapes or missing some letters when reading."

Students themselves acknowledge that learning outcomes often do not match their efforts, as expressed by AA, MA, and MIA. Mrs. N also confirmed:

"There are students who have tried hard to study, but their results are still low. For example, students who diligently memorize at home often make mistakes when they're tested in class when they say or remember what they've memorized."

The research findings revealed that students' learning difficulties arise through the interaction of internal and external factors. Internal factors are evident in low self-regulation skills, slow information processing speeds, and limited cognitive capacity, which cause students to take longer to understand, take notes, and complete learning assignments. Although some students demonstrate a strong desire to learn, their academic results remain low because most of their cognitive energy is used to recognize Arabic letters and understand their pronunciation. Meanwhile, the dominant external factors are digital distractions through excessive use of television and mobile phones, as well as minimal learning support from their families. Lack of support at home means students rarely review material, so the skills they have acquired in school do not develop optimally. This finding aligns with the discussion section, which explains that learning difficulties result from the interaction between students' neurocognitive limitations, disrupted learning environments caused by digital distractions, and low family support, which should function as a learning support system.

3.3. Impact of student learning difficulties

Maladaptive psychosocial responses in slow learners are evident through the use of masking as a coping mechanism to maintain self-esteem amidst the difficulties of learning Islamic Religious Education (PAI), particularly in Arabic literacy. Students tend to remain silent, pretend to understand, or simply follow their peers' activities without truly engaging. This was evident in an interview with AA:

> *"Yes, ma'am. When I don't understand the material, I become lazy about doing assignments. When working in groups, I'm mostly silent. I also often remain silent because I'm afraid my friends will laugh at me if I ask questions."*

This statement was confirmed by AAS, SA, and SA. Teachers also observed similar behaviour, as expressed by N:

> *"There are some students who seem less enthusiastic during memorization activities. They tend to remain silent, some even pretend to be following the memorization, but their voices are not heard."*

This statement was also confirmed by other teachers, such as PS and LD. Meanwhile, students directly admitted to remaining silent and not taking notes. This situation suggests that Arabic literacy barriers trigger shame and fear of failure, causing students to isolate themselves from teacher support by pretending to understand. In addition to masking, a maladaptive response also appears in the form of avoidance, which is a more passive cessation of participation due to learning frustration. Students acknowledged this tendency, as expressed by RM:

> *"Yes, ma'am. When I don't understand the material, I become lazy about doing assignments. When working in groups, I tend to stay quiet. Sometimes I also feel lazy about writing and less enthusiastic when asked to join the group."*

This statement was also expressed by AAS, MR, and MIA. Teachers also noted symptoms of withdrawal due to cognitive load, as expressed by Mrs. LD:

> *"Students write Quranic verses slowly and often make mistakes in forming letters. Furthermore, students' focus is easily distracted, so short breaks are needed during the lesson to prevent boredom."*

These findings suggest that Arabic literacy barriers and cognitive limitations not only impact academic performance but also foster defensive behavioural patterns that reinforce students' learning isolation. The decline in self-efficacy in slow learners is evident through low self-esteem, a cumulative effect of learning difficulties, particularly in Arabic literacy. Students feel inferior when comparing themselves to their peers, which triggers shame and a fear of participating. This is evident in MA's confession:

> *"I feel embarrassed, Ma'am, because I don't feel comfortable with my friends. I'm also afraid of being scolded by my parents."*

This statement was also echoed by SFS, SA, and SH. Ms. N validated this emotional impact by stating:

> *"Students exhibit low levels of self-confidence, characterized by a reluctance to answer questions and a fear of being asked to come to the front of the class. Furthermore, some students also tend to quickly become bored and feel inferior when they encounter difficulties completing assigned tasks. These conditions affect students' participation in the learning process and can hinder the development of their academic abilities*."

Teachers' diaries also demonstrate the need for interventions in the form of positive affirmations, as expressed by SFS:

"Teachers provide positive reinforcement in the form of praise and motivation to increase students' confidence in participating in learning. This effort is made because students still experience difficulty reading the Hijaiyah letters, as indicated by frequently mixing up or missing some letters when reading."

These findings confirm that cognitive barriers have developed into emotional burdens that drive students to be passive and use defines mechanisms such as silence and masking. Furthermore, learned helplessness emerges as a further form of repeated failure, where students feel that their efforts no longer impact learning outcomes. Teachers observed that students:

"Students experiencing learning difficulties tend to exhibit low social engagement in the learning process. This is evident in their tendency to be silent more often, inactive in group discussions, and sometimes choosing to isolate themselves from their peers. Furthermore, students also exhibit low self-confidence, characterized by a reluctance to answer questions and a fear of being asked to come forward in class."

This statement was corroborated by PS, M, and BH. From the student's perspective, this condition is reflected in MA's statement:

"Sometimes I feel lazy, Ma'am, and lose my enthusiasm for learning because I still don't understand the material being studied."

The research findings indicate that the impact of learning difficulties is not only felt academically but also extends to students' psychological and social spheres. Difficulty understanding Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material and Arabic literacy barriers cause students to experience decreased self-confidence, shame, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes in front of their peers. As a self-protection mechanism, students tend to choose silence, pretend to understand the material, avoid discussions, and withdraw from group activities. In the long term, this condition develops into learned helplessness, a feeling of helplessness because students believe that their efforts will not produce significant changes in their academic performance. This finding is consistent with the discussion section, which emphasized that Arabic literacy barriers and cognitive limitations trigger decreased self-efficacy, the emergence of masking and avoidance behaviours, and hinder social participation and the internalization of Islamic Religious Education values. Thus, the impact of learning difficulties is multidimensional, affecting cognitive, emotional, and social aspects simultaneously.

3.4. Teacher Efforts to Overcome Student Learning Difficulties

The Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher's interventions in addressing Arabic literacy barriers among slow-learners in Kemuning District demonstrate a shift in role from instructor to adaptive instructional designer. Teachers no longer use a rigid classical approach, but instead adapt strategies to students' cognitive and emotional needs through individual guidance, modifications to memorization methods, and motivational reinforcement. This is evident in teacher practices that combine pedagogical approaches with affective support, as N explained:

"Providing ongoing advice and guiding students through a personalized approach so they maintain their self-confidence."

Similarly, Mrs. LD explained:

"Teachers provide positive reinforcement in the form of praise and motivation to increase students' confidence in participating in learning. In addition, teachers also provide advice and encouragement to encourage students to study more diligently at home to improve their understanding and learning outcomes."

A MA student said:

"I will try to review my memorization more diligently at home, Ma'am, so my parents won't scold me anymore."

Teachers implement a personalized approach through ongoing advice and positive reinforcement to help slow-learners maintain their confidence in learning. Teacher N explained:

"Guiding students slowly because their focus can easily be lost when they receive too much material."

This was also confirmed by Ms. MA and MIA. Furthermore, the narrative approach is used as a strategy to simplify abstract material through stories, advice, and personal dialogue. The use of auditory media, such as songs, also helps students build meaningful associations and increases learning motivation. ABS (SDN 163) stated:

"I want to review memorizing the Asmaul Husna at home by listening to songs about the names of Allah."

These findings indicate that a narrative approach combined with emotional stimulation can increase student engagement and motivation in Islamic Religious Education learning. In addition to the narrative approach, teachers also implement auditory strategies, chunking, and slow pacing to address the memory and information processing speed limitations of slow learners. A LD teacher (SDN 166) stated:

"The teacher guides students in reading the Quran by guiding them through the reading step by step, word by word, so that it's easier for them to follow and understand the pronunciation. Furthermore, the teacher provides positive reinforcement in the form of praise and motivation to boost students' confidence in the learning process."

Student IN's response:
"I want to study more diligently, Ma'am, little by little so I can memorize it well."

Research findings indicate that teachers strive to address students' learning difficulties through various adaptive learning strategies tailored to the characteristics of slow learners. Teachers act not only as transmitters of material but also as facilitators, providing individual guidance, motivational reinforcement, and ongoing emotional support. Strategies used include a narrative approach to simplify abstract material, the use of auditory media such as the *Asmaul Husna* song to aid memorization, the application of chunking by dividing material into small parts, and slow pacing by delivering material slowly and gradually. Furthermore, teachers provide positive reinforcement in the form of praise, motivation, and a personal approach to maintain students' confidence throughout the learning process. This finding is in line with the discussion section which emphasizes that the combination of technical and affective strategies is effective in reducing cognitive load, increasing memory retention, strengthening self-efficacy, and creating a more inclusive learning environment that supports students' academic and emotional development.

Discussion

The findings show that students' learning difficulties in Islamic Religious Education were shaped by the interaction of Arabic literacy demands, limited retention, slower information processing, emotional responses, and uneven support outside school. Arabic literacy emerged as a gateway barrier because students had to recognize, pronounce, and write Hijaiyah letters before understanding verses, prayers, or other religious concepts. This increased instructional demands, particularly when decoding symbols, memorizing content, and understanding meaning were expected simultaneously. From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory, such combined demands may exceed the capacity of students who need more time and repetition to process information (Sweller, 2020). The findings extend research

on Arabic learning difficulties by showing that literacy barriers in Islamic Religious Education affect not only language performance but also access to the wider curriculum and participation in religious learning activities (Akla & Hardiansyah, 2023).

A second finding concerns the mismatch between students' processing pace and whole-class instruction. Students described difficulty taking notes, completing assignments, and retaining memorized material within the available time. Teachers similarly observed that some students completed only part of a task while their peers had finished. The problem was not simply low motivation because several students continued to make efforts despite weak academic results. Instead, instructional pacing and task complexity were not always aligned with their learning needs. Self-regulated learning theory emphasizes that students require support in managing attention, effort, and learning strategies when tasks are cognitively demanding (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2021). However, self-regulation should not be treated solely as an individual responsibility. Inflexible classroom expectations may repeatedly disadvantage students who require additional processing time.

Learning difficulties also had emotional and social consequences. Students reported embarrassment, fear of being laughed at, reluctance to ask questions, and silence during group activities. These responses may represent attempts to avoid negative evaluation and protect self-worth rather than laziness or deliberate disengagement. Repeated academic difficulty can weaken students' academic self-concept, particularly when they compare their performance with peers (Guay et al., 2003). Control-Value Theory also suggests that negative achievement emotions emerge when students consider a task important but perceive limited control over success (Pekrun & Perry, 2014). Thus, difficulties in Islamic Religious Education influence academic performance, emotional well-being, and classroom participation. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that learning difficulties can intersect with behavioral and psychosocial problems when appropriate support is unavailable (Gabriel & Börnert-Ringleb, 2023).

Environmental conditions further shaped students' experiences. Participants perceived television and mobile-phone use as reducing the time available for reviewing lessons, while limited family assistance made it difficult to reinforce skills introduced at school. These findings do not prove that digital media directly caused poor achievement. Rather, students and teachers viewed inconsistent practice and insufficient home support as conditions that sustained learning difficulties. Person–environment fit theory is relevant because learning outcomes partly depend on whether environmental support matches individual needs (Edwards & Shipp, 2021). Students requiring repetition, guided practice, and encouragement may be particularly disadvantaged when such support is unavailable. Intervention should therefore strengthen both classroom support and teacher–family collaboration.

Teachers responded through individualized guidance, repetition, chunking, slower pacing, auditory materials, narrative explanation, and positive reinforcement. Participants perceived these strategies as helpful because they reduced the amount of information presented at one time and created opportunities to participate without fear of failure. Gradual assistance is consistent with scaffolding, through which learners receive support for tasks beyond their current independent capability (Sawyer, 2005). Dividing complex material into smaller units may also help manage cognitive demands (Sweller, 2020). Positive feedback can strengthen motivation and self-efficacy when it focuses on effort, strategy use, and individual progress rather than peer comparison (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020, 2021).

Overall, inclusive Islamic Religious Education requires more than additional repetition. Support should combine accessible instructional sequencing, flexible pacing, emotional safety, and school–family collaboration. Teachers should separate Arabic-letter recognition, pronunciation, meaning-making, and memorization into gradual stages, while schools should provide structured additional practice. Nevertheless, the strategies identified in this study were reported as helpful rather than tested for effectiveness. Future research should examine their longer-term influence through longitudinal or intervention-based designs and explore how family conditions, classroom practices, and student confidence interact over time.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that slow learners' difficulties in Islamic Religious Education are shaped by the interaction of Arabic literacy barriers, limited memory retention, slow information processing, digital distraction, and insufficient home support. These difficulties affect not only academic achievement but also students' self-efficacy, participation, and emotional well-being. Teachers responded through adaptive strategies such as individualized guidance, narrative explanation, chunking, slow pacing, auditory support, and positive reinforcement. The findings suggest that inclusive Islamic Religious Education requires cognitively accessible materials, emotionally safe classrooms, and stronger collaboration between teachers and families.

This study has limitations in terms of sample size limited to several public elementary schools in Kemuning District, the use of subjective data that could potentially cause bias, the lack of in-depth mapping of variations in family conditions, the absence of quantitative cognitive instruments to measure working memory capacity, and the relatively short observation duration, which means that the long-term effectiveness of adaptive learning strategies cannot be comprehensively evaluated. Future research is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies to test the long-term effectiveness of chunking and slow pacing strategies on the literacy development of slow-learning Arab students. Furthermore, it is necessary to explore the relationship between family socio-economic conditions and student self-efficacy, and utilize participatory visual methods such as simple drawings or comics to examine the internalization of Islamic Religious Education spiritual values.

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