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PAI Teacher's Strategy in Building a Classroom Environment That is Friendly to Children with Special Needs

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ABSTRACT

Effective classroom learning depends on implementing appropriate strategies and creating a supportive environment, especially for students with disabilities. This study explores the strategies adopted by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School Palembang to establish a friendly classroom environment for children with special needs. The research focuses on seven students with neurodevelopmental disorders who face challenges in communication, social interaction, and exhibit tantrums. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis, with the PAI teacher as the main subject. The findings reveal that effective strategies include understanding and addressing individual needs, fostering an inclusive learning atmosphere, customizing teaching methods for special needs students, and applying clear and straightforward communication. However, significant challenges, such as managing classroom dynamics and ensuring harmonious interactions among peers, often demand additional time and effort. This study highlights the critical role of PAI teachers in overcoming these challenges and creating an inclusive, supportive educational environment that accommodates all students, particularly those with special needs. These findings underscore the need for continuous professional development for teachers in inclusive education practices.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental right for every child, including children with special needs, as outlined in the Education for All framework. This framework emphasizes that every child has the right to education without discrimination, tailored to their unique characteristics, interests, talents, and learning needs (Jaya et al., 2023; Suprihatiningrum et al., 2022). Educational systems and programs must be designed to accommodate the diverse needs of children, including granting access for children with disabilities to regular schools that provide a child-centered and inclusive educational environment (Leifler, 2020).

In Indonesia, data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in the 2024 academic year recorded 2.4 million school-aged children (5–14 years) with special needs (Claudia Wang et al., 2023). In Palembang, one of the schools that enrolls children with special needs is Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School. According to research findings, out of 165 enrolled students, 7 are children with special needs. This highlights the importance of implementing inclusive and child-friendly approaches within the education system, particularly in regular schools.

In the context of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning, teachers face more complex challenges compared to other subjects. This is due to the objectives of IRE, which not only focus on intellectual aspects but also involve affective and psychomotor domains. Islamic Religious Education aims to shape students into faithful Muslims with noble character, who embody Islamic values in their personal, social, and national (Anwar, 2024; Fatimah, 2024; Hermanto & Pamungkas, 2023).Therefore, IRE teaching requires precise methods and adaptive strategies, particularly when addressing the diverse characteristics of students, including those with special needs.

An educator who is involved in the world of learning, so that the learning process can run effectively and efficiently, mastery of the material is not enough, he must also have his own learning strategy that is in accordance with the abilities of students, especially in special schools where there are various kinds of children who have limitations (Fatimah, 2024; Hermanto & Pamungkas, 2023; Stevens et al., 2002). The teacher's strategy in delivering lessons is very important and very prioritized (Febriyani et al., 2024; Galih Kinanti et al., 2022). In the learning process, so that what has been planned or conceptualized previously by a teacher or educator, especially regarding indicators or learning achievements, can be achieved properly without any obstacles. As with the definition of the strategy itself, namely: learning or educational strategies are fundamental action steps and play a major role in the teaching and learning process to achieve educational goals (Difa'ul Husna et al., 2024; Subarna et al., 2022).

The results of initial observations that researchers conducted at Az-Zahrah Palembang Islamic Elementary School, researchers obtained data by means of observation (seeing directly in the field) at school. There the researchers saw, there were 25 students in class IV and 2 students with disabilities, all of whom were conducive in getting their lessons here, namely learning Islamic religious education. In the PAI learning process, researchers saw that students could receive learning well in the learning process explained by the PAI teacher. They look cool and enjoy the learning process and have good social interactions. In addition, the teacher looks friendly in delivering the material, and is very good at controlling the class so that students are conducive to each other.

Teachers play a pivotal role in creating a learning environment that is inclusive and supportive for all students, especially for children with special needs. The teaching strategies employed must facilitate active student engagement, utilize adequate facilities and resources, and address students' emotional, social, and intellectual

aspects (Djafri & Korlefura, n.d.; Jaya et al., 2023; Maulana et al., 2024). Based on initial observations at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School in Palembang, it was observed that in Grade IV, the IRE teacher successfully fostered a conducive learning atmosphere for students, including those with special needs. The teacher was not only friendly in delivering the material but also skillful in classroom management, fostering positive social interactions among students.

However, despite the evident efforts of the teachers in creating an inclusive environment, challenges remain that require further exploration to ensure that the strategies used can optimally support the needs of children with special needs (Maulana et al., 2024; Suprihatiningrum et al., 2022). Based on this background, this study aims to explore the strategies employed by teachers in building a child-friendly classroom environment for children with special needs and to identify the challenges faced by Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers along with potential solutions in creating an inclusive and supportive classroom environment.

2.   Methodology

This study employs a qualitative field research approach, as suggested by (Creswell, 2012), aiming to explore the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in creating a classroom environment that is friendly to children with special needs. The research emphasizes a process-oriented analysis to generate in-depth and meaningful conclusions (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022).

The research design integrates multiple data collection techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The primary data sources are purposively selected to focus on PAI teachers as respondents, while the study's object centers on their strategies in fostering an inclusive classroom environment. Supporting data are collected from school administrators, special education coordinators, and parents of children with special needs to triangulate the findings.

Data collection methods include: (1) Observation: Conducted during classroom interactions to capture real-time practices, teacher-student interactions, and strategies employed to manage neurodevelopmental challenges. (2) Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with PAI teachers to gain insights into their approaches, challenges, and perceptions. Additional interviews with administrators and parents provide contextual understanding (3) Document Analysis: Includes reviewing lesson plans, classroom policies, and communication records to assess alignment with inclusive education principles (Fadli, 2021; Kaharuddin, 2020). Data analysis follows a systematic process comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The study applies triangulation to validate findings and ensure credibility, focusing on the contextual application of strategies at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School Palembang.

3.   Results and Discussion

Teachers' strategies for building a child-friendly classroom environment for children with special needs

Understanding and recognizing the needs of each child with special needs is a very important first step in creating an effective and inclusive learning experience (Adams et al., 2016; Febriyani et al., 2024). Each child has unique needs, whether physical, emotional or cognitive. Therefore, teachers need to have a deep understanding of each child's condition and characteristics in order to provide appropriate support. To start, teachers can identify children's needs through various means, such as direct observation, discussions with parents, and working with a team of professionals such as psychologists, therapists, and education specialists (Stevens et al., 2002).

In this case, it is important for the teacher to recognize the type of special needs the child has, for example whether the child has a developmental disorder such as autism, dyslexia, ADHD, hearing impairment or motor development delay. Each of these conditions requires a different approach to teaching. It is also very important to recognize the child's strengths and weaknesses. Some children may be better at visual or auditory aspects, while others may excel in motor skills or creativity (Halil et al., 2024; Stevens et al., 2002). Appreciating this uniqueness helps teachers tailor more personalized and effective teaching methods. For example, a child with dyslexia may understand material more easily if it is given in visual or audio form rather than long written text, while a child with autism may need a more structured routine and less overstimulation in the classroom (Nzuza, 2023).

By understanding the needs of each child, teachers can create a supportive learning environment, design relevant materials, and provide instruction that suits the way the child learns. This approach not only helps children with special needs feel more accepted and valued, but also gives them the opportunity to develop to their full potential, according to their abilities and potential (Zeedyk et al., 2024).

Inclusive education is the second step, allowing students from all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side, for the benefit of all," according to UNICEF. Inclusive learning environments are increasingly recognized around the world for not only fulfilling fundamental human rights but also changing the face of education (Halil et al., 2024; Mujahada & Noviandari, 2022; Nzuza, 2023). Inclusive learning gives every student the opportunity to succeed while participating in a community that marginalizes no one and accepts everyone. Recent studies show that teaching differently-abled students together, in regular classes and for most or all of the school day, benefits them all in a variety of ways.

If inclusive education is successful, every student has equal access to a quality education that will prepare them for success in an increasingly interconnected and diverse global society (Lubis et al., 2022). Some students excel in traditional academic learning, while others may have different abilities that make success in a traditional learning environment challenging. Examples of the types of differences

between students include: Cognitive: Autism, attention and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Physical disabilities: Cerebral palsy, blindness, kinesthetic learners Social: Social anxiety, oppositional defiance, variations in leadership skills Emotional: Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, variations in emotional intelligence Inclusive learning environments create shared educational spaces that are accessible, welcoming and appropriate for all students. In any classroom, inclusivity means: Accepting and including all students in the classroom Understanding and responding to ability differences among students Challenging each student equally without limitations (Djafri & Korlefura, 2024.; Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022; Zeedyk et al., 2024).

Studies show high-inclusion schools benefit students with disabilities or learning challenges and their peers in significant ways that support academic, social and emotional growth. (Highly inclusive schools are schools where students with disabilities stay in the general education classroom at least 80% of the time, instead of being segregated for instruction. An inclusive learning environment accepts all students and strives to show them that they are valued and valuable, regardless of ability differences (Stevens et al., 2002). When the culture of a high-inclusion classroom is compassionate - a culture of empathy and mutual respect - students' self-esteem increases. In turn, students learn to be accepting of others. Thus, their confidence in their role as supportive contributors to society increases (Subarna et al., 2022).

Inclusive learning ensures academic support is available to all students, regardless of differences in their cognitive or physical abilities or other differences that may limit their participation in less supportive environments. Academic support can take the form of a variety of teaching techniques and tools, depending on each student's learning differences (Rohmah & Diana, 2023; Sukandar, 2022). Such techniques and tools allow each student to access the same curriculum as their peers, thus providing them with equal opportunities to reach their full potential.

The top priority for PAI teachers when creating an inclusive learning environment is to establish a safe classroom culture from the start. In an environment where students feel free to share their interests, goals and obstacles with the teacher and each other, they can also feel comfortable finding their own path, challenging themselves and striving for excellence. In addition, encouraging students to form personal relationships paves the way for empathy and teamwork. Students who feel a sense of camaraderie are better collaborators, able to work well together to achieve shared learning goals (Saputri & Hasibuan, 2022). For students who think of themselves as outsiders, a safe classroom culture allows them to begin to feel free to try, struggle and make mistakes along the way. Teachers can take a proactive role in building a safe classroom culture that fosters respect by: a) Establishing clear classroom rules b) Establishing defined student roles c) Recognizing teachable moments and pointing out lessons learned d) Establishing guidelines for fair and respectful interactions e) Conducting regular teacher self-assessments to ensure they are keeping the classroom culture safe (Khanip et al., 2024; Sukandar, 2022).

The third step is to understand the needs of each child individually. Educators need to conduct assessments to find out the strengths and weaknesses of children. Thus, teaching strategies can be adapted to the specific needs of each child. Adapting learning for children with special needs is an important step so that they can access education effectively and develop to their potential (Djafri & Korlefura, 2024; Saputri & Hasibuan, 2022). Each child with special needs has unique needs, so teachers need to recognize their specific conditions through an individualized approach. Adjustments to learning materials, such as the use of technology or visual media, can make it easier for children with disabilities to understand lessons. Flexible teaching, such as multisensory methods or structured teaching, is also important to support their learning. A supportive classroom environment, with settings that reduce distractions and social-emotional approaches that focus on building confidence, will help children with disabilities feel more comfortable and motivated. Collaboration with parents and other professionals and continuing to develop inclusive teaching skills are also key to creating an optimal learning environment for children with special needs (Subarna et al., 2022; Zeedyk et al., 2024).

Step four: Using clear and simple communication is very important when interacting with children with special needs because it helps them understand information more easily and reduces their confusion. Teachers need to choose simple and direct words, avoiding complex or abstract sentences (Difa'ul Husna et al., 2024; Khanip et al., 2024; Maulana et al., 2024). In addition, speaking at an appropriate pace and providing pauses to process information is also helpful. Using non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions or hand gestures, can clarify messages, especially for children with hearing loss or autism. Structured, step-by-step instructions and the use of pictures or visuals can also facilitate understanding. Last but not least, allowing enough time for the child to respond and always providing positive reinforcement will boost their confidence. With this approach, communication will be more effective, create a comfortable learning atmosphere, and support the optimal development of children with special needs. One of the inclusive learning activities can be seen in picture 1 below.

Picture 1. Inclusive Learning Activities

In picture 1 above portrays a dynamic scene of an inclusive classroom where a teacher is actively engaging with a diverse group of students, including both regular students and those with special needs. The teacher is shown moving purposefully around the room, carefully observing and interacting with each student to ensure that their individual needs are met. This approach goes beyond mere supervision; it demonstrates a proactive effort to provide personalized guidance and support tailored to each student's abilities and learning styles. The teacher's consistent attention to every child reflects a deep commitment to fostering a sense of belonging and equity within the classroom environment.

By continuously monitoring students' progress and addressing challenges in real time, the teacher creates an atmosphere where learning becomes a collaborative and inclusive process. This strategy not only enhances the academic experience but also encourages social interaction and mutual respect among students, bridging the gap between those with special needs and their peers. The teacher's actions embody the principles of child-centered education, emphasizing the importance of creating a nurturing, supportive, and enjoyable learning environment where all students can thrive (Galih Kinanti et al., 2022). This inclusive teaching practice is a testament to the educator's dedication to promoting not only effective learning but also a culture of acceptance and unity within the classroom.

Challenges and Solutions for PAI Teachers in Building a Classroom Environment that is Friendly to Children with Special Needs

Managing a class with learners who are difficult to communicate with, especially children with special needs, is a big challenge for a teacher. These children may have difficulty understanding instructions or interacting with their peers, which can cause tension and chaos in the classroom. In addition, some children may struggle to focus on the lesson or become stimulated by their surroundings, such as noise or

lots of visual stimuli. This requires more time and attention from the teacher to manage a conducive classroom situation and ensure that every child, especially those with disabilities, feels welcome and supported (Saputri & Hasibuan, 2022).

To overcome this challenge, teachers need to implement structured and consistent classroom management strategies. The use of clear routines, simple instructions and reward systems can help create a calmer and more focused environment. In addition, the use of non-verbal communication, such as pictures or signs, can be very effective in helping children who have difficulty understanding verbal instructions. Reducing excess stimuli in the classroom, such as noise or overly bright lights, can also help children with special needs to focus and feel more comfortable (Basuki, 2023; Mujahada & Noviandari, 2022) .

It is also important for teachers to give extra time and patience in dealing with challenging situations. Children with impaired communication or emotional regulation may need more time to respond to instructions or calm down. Giving them space to regulate their emotions or take a break can help create a more conducive classroom situation. In addition, collaboration with parents and other professionals, such as psychologists or therapists, is essential to design a more effective and consistent approach both at home and at school. With a patient and coordinated approach, a conducive classroom atmosphere can be created, supporting optimal learning for all students (Difa'ul Husna et al., 2024; Jaya et al., 2023).

It is important for teachers to involve others in supporting successful inclusive classroom management. Collaboration with parents is essential to understand each child's specific needs and create consistency between home and school environments. In addition, working with professionals, such as psychologists, occupational therapists or educational counselors, can provide teachers with additional insights in designing more effective learning and classroom management strategies (Sukandar, 2022).

By applying a coordinated and needs-centered approach, PAI teachers can create a welcoming environment for all children, including those with disabilities. This environment not only supports academic learning but also develops empathy, tolerance and respect among all students, in accordance with the Islamic values taught. This approach, while demanding more effort, will ultimately have a huge positive impact on both the children with disabilities and the whole classroom community.

4. Conclusion

After the author presents the main points of the problem and its discussion about the PAI teacher's strategy in Building a Classroom Environment that is Friendly to Children with Special Needs at Az-Zahrah Islamic Elementary School Palembang, the author concludes that the PAI teacher's strategy in the learning process in the classroom consists of: PAI teachers' strategies in understanding and recognizing the

needs of each child with special needs, inclusive learning by creating an open and supportive learning environment for all children, adjusting learning methods specifically for children with special needs, using clear and simple communication.

The challenges and solutions faced by PAI teachers in the classroom learning process are: Managing a class with students who are difficult to communicate with, especially children with special needs, is a big challenge for a teacher. To overcome this challenge, teachers need to implement structured and consistent classroom management strategies. The use of clear routines, simple instructions and reward systems can help create a calmer and more focused environment.

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