



THE CONTRIBUTION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION EMPOWERED TEACHERS IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ISLAMIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the contribution of the Islamic Religious Education Empowered Teachers in improving students' learning abilities at SMP Negeri 1 Garut, Indonesia. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with one Islamic Religious Education teacher and five students. The findings of the study show that the teacher plays an important role in creating a religious and supportive school environment through various spiritual programs, such as Dhuha prayers, routine Qur'an recitation, and congregational Zuhur prayers. Additionally, the teacher introduced an innovative environmental initiative, the "school waste collection movement," which encourages students to bring home at least one piece of trash every day to foster a sense of responsibility for environmental cleanliness. The teaching strategy applied reflects a holistic approach that assesses students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills, while also involving collaboration with other Islamic Religious Education teachers and the wider school community. Despite facing internal challenges, such as maintaining motivation and emotional stability, as well as external challenges such as low learning motivation and limited basic skills among students, the teacher is able to overcome these obstacles through reflective, empathetic, and collaborative approaches. This study concludes that the teacher's diverse contributions not only improve the quality of Islamic Religious Education learning but also support the overall development of students, demonstrating that religious education can have a broader impact on character development and environmental awareness.

Keywords: Empowered teacher, Islamic education, learning ability, character building, environmental awareness, phenomenology.

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INTRODUCTION | مقدمة

Education is the main instrument in shaping superior and competitive human resources. In today's era of globalization, many countries particularly developing nations still face major challenges in improving students' basic competencies. The (UNESCO, 2024) report shows that more than 60% of students in developing countries have not yet achieved the minimum proficiency in reading literacy and mathematics. A similar phenomenon also occurs in Indonesia. Based on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 report, as many as 80% of participating countries experienced a decline in reading literacy scores compared to 2018. However, Indonesia, on the contrary, showed an increase in reading literacy scores (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). This improvement is indeed encouraging, yet it is still insufficient to close the quality gap in education that persists across various regions. Therefore, there needs to be strengthening in all aspects of education, including Islamic Religious Education empowered teacher, which plays a strategic role in shaping students' religious and moral character.

Islamic Religious Education in schools is not merely aimed at transferring religious knowledge, but also at instilling noble values such as good character, discipline, responsibility, politeness, self-confidence, and care for others. (Fuzyanti et al., 2023) emphasize that Islamic education learning should ideally serve as a space for shaping students to excel cognitively, affectively, and psychomotorically. For this reason, Islamic education learning approaches need to be designed in a contextual, active, and meaningful way in order to address the challenges of the times (Vieri et al., 2025). The active learning theory supports this view, highlighting students' active participation in the learning process, social interaction, and emotional involvement in constructing understanding (Winarji, 2018). Meanwhile, character education theory (Wahyuni, 2021) states that education must comprehensively touch on the aspects of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action.

In response to these challenges, the (Kemendikbudristek, 2021) launched the Empowered Teacher Program as part of the national education transformation. This program aims to produce teachers with instructional leadership, who can act as agents of change in schools, and who are capable of delivering innovative and contextual learning (Mulyasa, 2022; Munir, 2024). In the context of Islamic education, the role of Empowered Teacher is particularly important, as they are expected not only to independently enhance students' academic achievements, but also to strengthen students' Islamic values by connecting learning with their real-life experiences (Anton et al., 2025; Sibagariang et al., 2021). As stated in the word of Allah SWT in Surah Al-Mujadalah verse 11.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ تَفَسَّحُوا فِي الْمَجَالِسِ فَافْسَحُوا يَفْسَحِ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَإِذَا قِيلَ انشُرُوا فَانشُرُوا يَرْفَعِ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ

The verse emphasizes the importance of elevating the status of those who possess knowledge, while at the same time reinforcing the position of teachers as the main actors in educational transformation. In this context, Islamic Religious Education empowered Teachers are expected to guide students not only to master the theoretical aspects of religion but also to internalize Islamic values in their daily lives.

However, this ideal has not yet been fully realized in practice. Preliminary findings from an interview with one empowered Teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Garut revealed *“various challenges that affect students' learning abilities in this subject. Some of the main obstacles include limitations in pedagogical mastery, particularly in integrating technology into the learning process and developing innovative and interactive learning methods. Although teachers have participated in training, many still face difficulties in designing effective lesson plans. In addition, students' low interest in Islamic Religious Education further worsens the situation. Learners tend to perceive Islamic religious education material as theoretical and irrelevant to their daily lives, which results in a lack of active participation and low learning motivation.”*

These findings are supported by (Letizia, 2025), who stated that many empowered teachers still struggle to design interactive learning despite having attended training programs. Similarly, (Abdurrahman & Ulfah, 2024) revealed that students' perception of Empowered Teachers as a non-contextual subject affects their motivation and comprehension. This condition highlights the urgent need for a more adaptive, applicable, and meaningful learning approach for students.

For this reason, the role of Guru Penggerak becomes increasingly important. They are expected to act as innovators, facilitators, and motivators in the learning process (Auliya Afifah, 2022; Lorensius, 2024). Nevertheless, these roles cannot be fully carried out without the support

of the school environment, parental involvement, and government policies that encourage the creation of a religious and contextual educational ecosystem (Rozak, 2024).

Previous studies have shown that teachers play a significant role in influencing students' motivation and academic achievement. (Herlina et al., 2023) found that teachers' managerial abilities are positively correlated with learning motivation. (Al-Baihaqi et al., 2024) asserted that inspiring teachers can shape students' religious character. However, most studies have not specifically addressed the contribution of Empowered teacher Islamic religious education as the outcome of a national strategic policy.

This indicates the existence of a research gap that deserves further examination. The gap can be explored through two theoretical perspectives. First, the social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and teachers' active involvement in the learning process. Second, the instructional leadership theory (Hatta, 2024) which positions teachers as the key actors in improving the quality of learning in schools.

Based on this description, this study aims to examine the contribution of Islamic Religious Education Empowered teachers in enhancing students' learning abilities at the junior high school level. The focus of the research includes the roles, strategies, impacts, and challenges faced by Empowered teacher Islamic religious education in carrying out their duties. This study employs a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of real experiences in the school environment and to contribute to the development of more innovative and transformative empowered teacher educational practices.

METHOD

منهج

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design. This approach was chosen to deeply explore the subjective experiences of the informants regarding the contribution of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in enhancing students' learning abilities. The phenomenological design provides space for the researcher to explore the meaning and interpretation of the lived experiences of both teachers and students within the context of Islamic religious learning that is intensive and reflective (Lim, 2025).

The population of this study consists of the educational community at SMP Negeri 1 Garut. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling, which involves deliberately selecting informants based on specific criteria considered relevant to the research objectives (Sugiyono, 2023). The criteria include: (1) an Islamic Religious Education teacher who has participated in the empowered teacher program, and (2) students who actively participate in Islamic education learning and are capable of providing reflective and in-depth information. Based on these criteria, one empowered teacher and five students were selected as the main informants. Data collection was carried out through three methods:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews, to gain a comprehensive understanding of informants' experiences, perspectives, and reflections.
2. Observation of learning activities, to capture real practices conducted by the empowered teacher in the classroom.
3. Documentation, as supporting data in the form of school records, notes, or relevant documents.

To ensure data validity, the study applied both source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the teacher and students to examine the consistency of perspectives among informants. Meanwhile,

methodological triangulation was applied by integrating interview and observation data to produce richer and more accurate findings. Data analysis followed three main stages (Hidayat et al., 2024)

1. Data reduction – the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw field data into a more organized form.
2. Data display – organizing the reduced data into descriptive narratives to facilitate the drawing of conclusions.
3. Conclusion drawing – the interpretive process of deriving meaning from the data to achieve an in-depth understanding of the role of empowered teachers in enhancing students' learning abilities.

Through this methodology, the study is expected to produce a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the contribution of Guru Penggerak PAI in the learning context at SMP Negeri 1 Garut.

RESULT | نتائج

The Role of Islamic Religious Education Empowered Teachers in Building A Religious Ecosystem in School

Based on the results of an interview with an Islamic religious education Driving teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Garut, it was found that the teacher plays an active role in fostering a religious ecosystem within the school. Some of the flagship programs initiated include congregational dhuha prayer, routine Qur'an recitation (تداريس) with a target of completing all 30 juz, and congregational zuhur prayer at school. The teacher stated:

"My primary role is to mobilize the school ecosystem. One of the ecosystems in the school is the positive culture that embodies religious values. For example, we initiated the dhuha prayer program. Then we initiated the Qur'an reading program, a routine (تداريس) to reach 30 juz. We also held congregational zuhur prayers these were all our initiatives."

In addition to serving as an Islamic religious education teacher and a motivator teacher, the informant also serves as the vice principal for student affairs. This further supports their contribution to broader student development, particularly in strengthening religious character within the school environment. The teacher also conveyed a long-term program that has been planned: memorization of juz 30 as a requirement for graduation:

"We have a future program we hope to implement a rule that by graduation, students must have memorized juz 30 as a graduation requirement. (إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ), it will be implemented next year. As for the memorization of short surahs by class, that is already being carried out by the respective teachers."

These findings indicate that the role of the Islamic religious education motivator teacher includes comprehensive planning, implementation, and development of religious programs within the school.

Equally important, the Islamic religious education motivator teacher also plays an active role in professional collaboration. They work together with other Islamic religious education teachers and teachers of other subjects through classroom observation and mutual feedback activities. The teacher explained:

"I also serve as an observer of learning practices. The collaboration begins with mutual correction, observing one another, and conducting observations together."

This collaboration is carried out through the subject teachers' forum at both the school and district levels. The student also shared:

"I like learning Islamic Education because sometimes the material is turned into songs, which makes it easier to remember and more fun. We also get to practice directly, not just listen to the teacher."

This role demonstrates a significant contribution to the professional development of other Islamic Religious Education teachers and to the collective improvement of educational quality. Through active involvement in professional communities, the Motivator Teacher helps foster a collaborative and sustainable learning culture, not only within their own school but also across the broader educational environment. Students' opinions also reflect a positive perspective on the role of the Motivator Teacher in the school. One student shared:

"With the presence of a Motivator Teacher, I feel that learning has become more enjoyable. Additionally, I have become more disciplined and responsible in completing assignments, and more prepared to share knowledge with my peers."

This statement indicates that the active role of the Islamic Religious Education Motivator Teacher not only enriches students' religious understanding but also contributes to shaping their character. The presence of the Motivator Teacher encourages students to be more disciplined, responsible, and collaborative, making the learning process more enjoyable and meaningful.



Figure 1. Students Performing the Habitual Dhuha Prayer Together.
(Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSh8q5YwE/>)

Strategies of the Islamic Religious Education Empowered Teachers

The Islamic Religious Education teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Garut applies a variety of strategies to enhance students' motivation and learning ability. The first strategy is creating an enjoyable classroom atmosphere through class agreements, ice breaking activities, and small games relevant to the lesson material. The teacher explained:

"To make the class enjoyable, we need to establish classroom agreements and small game programs that make students happy and comfortable. When they feel comfortable, learning becomes easier to absorb. I always start the lesson with ice breaking to make students more active and enthusiastic."

The teacher also utilizes popular media such as TikTok, which contains learning materials, and encourages students to express their understanding through various creative products aligned with their interests and learning styles:

"Today's kids love things that go viral. So I create games related to the material, for example using TikTok, they really enjoy that. Some also use other media like PowerPoint, Canva, illustrations, poems, short stories, or rhymes. I let them choose freely."

Differentiated strategies are also implemented by providing various learning models based on students' learning styles. The teacher developed games like "teburai" (guess the explanation) and self-made puzzles to accommodate individual needs:

"I have a game called 'teburai' (guessing the explanation), like matching verses with their meanings. I also made my own puzzle. The students love it because learning doesn't feel tense. I also pay attention to their learning styles. For example, if a student prefers writing but isn't good at speaking, that's okay I let them be a writer. What matters is that they can express their understanding."

The teacher recognizes the importance of identifying each student's unique potential and characteristics. They don't force shy students to speak but instead assign them roles based on their strengths and comfort, such as writers or observers. Meanwhile, outspoken students are given the role of presenters during group presentations. This shows the teacher's commitment to flexible and inclusive student facilitation:

"If there's a student who only wants to write, we support them in writing. If someone loves to talk, we give them a chance to speak. Even the mischievous students are given roles, like group monitors, so they can still learn in their own way."

Inclusivity in Islamic Religious Education is also carefully maintained. The teacher allows non-Muslim students to participate without pressure:

"Non-Muslim students also join my class because they feel comfortable. But I never force them. In fact, because they're not forced, they're willing to learn and even become actively engaged."

Flexibility in classroom management is a core principle. The teacher gives students the freedom to choose the format of their assignments and incorporates small challenges to boost motivation:

"Memorize the fastest or explain "When I assign tasks, I always give them freedom. The content is the same, but the format can vary. Sometimes I create small challenges, like who can something in a creative way. That really motivates them."

The teacher is also aware that personal approach and self-performance significantly influence students' enthusiasm for learning:

"We must first improve our own performance the way we speak, our expressions, and energy while teaching. If we're enthusiastic and close to our students, they'll be drawn to us and naturally more receptive to what we teach."

Another strategy used is the implementation of positive habits that, although unwritten, are consistently applied, such as starting with group prayers, giving motivational talks, and introducing learning challenges:

"I always begin lessons with a group prayer and motivation. This makes students realize the importance of listening, learning, and respecting others. I also give challenges like who wants to go first or who can answer questions, they start competing."

Creativity is also encouraged through open-ended assignments:

"Assignments don't always have to be PowerPoints. They're free to use Canva, drawings, short stories, rhymes, whatever fits their creativity. This makes them feel appreciated and more motivated."

The teacher also emphasizes the importance of parental involvement in the learning process, such as requiring signatures on test results and communicating learning progress:

“After every test, I ask students to inform their parents and get their signature. I even say, ‘Tell your Mom and Dad that today you learned Islamic Religious Education.’ It’s simple but meaningful for them. The next day, they come back with stories and they feel proud.”

A firm yet flexible approach is also applied:

“When I’m being casual, I let them be expressive. But when I’m serious, everyone must be quiet. A teacher needs to know when to be firm and when to be relaxed.”

Student feedback shows that the learning strategies used are enjoyable and help understanding. One student commented:

“Studying Islamic religious education isn’t boring because we get songs to help with memorization, and there are games too. We also get to choose our assignments, so we can go with what we like. That makes it easier to understand and remember the material.”

In addition, the teacher fosters character development through positive habits outside of classroom hours. One practical example is the school cleanliness movement program (GERSIH) with the concept of "1 student 1 piece of trash." This program is held after school, requiring every student to pick up at least one piece of trash before leaving. Its goal is to instill responsibility, love for cleanliness, and social awareness. The teacher emphasized that this activity is also part of practicing religious values in daily life and is integrated into Islamic Religious Education learning.



Figure 2. Habitual Practice of Praying and Reciting Dhikr Together Before Studying. (Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSh8qbfkT/>)

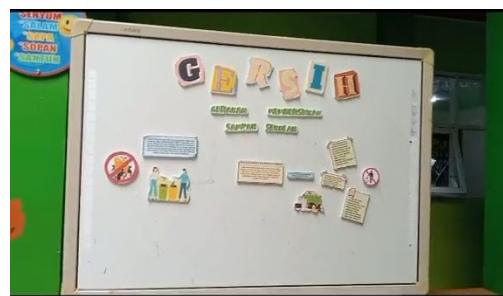


Figure 3. School Trash Clean-Up Movement (Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSh8qjXED/>)



Figure 4. Students Participating in the School Trash Clean-Up Movement. (Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSh8pHCmm/>)



Figure 5. Educational Game Using the TikTok Platform
(Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSh8qf3Dk/>)

The Impact of The Islamic Religious Education Teacher's Contribution

The Impact of Learning Strategies

The Islamic Religious Education Teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Garut assesses the impact of the applied learning strategies through formative and summative assessments, as well as direct observation of students' participation in class.

"To measure the impact of learning strategies, we use both formative and summative tests. Formative tests are conducted continuously throughout the learning process, while summative tests are held at the end of a learning period, such as midterms and finals. We also assess students in three domains: knowledge, attitude, and skills."

The teacher also highlights the importance of observation in evaluating student progress, especially regarding memorization, practical skills, and active participation.

"I can measure students' comprehension through direct practice, for example, how quickly they memorize a verse from the Qur'an or demonstrate other class skills. This allows me to see how much their understanding and abilities have improved."

Students respond positively to the learning strategies. They say the lessons are more engaging and easier to understand, especially when delivered creatively, such as through songs.

"I like learning Islamic Education because sometimes the material is turned into songs, which makes it easier to remember and more fun. We also get to practice directly, not just listen to the teacher."

Furthermore, the strategy has led to increased self-confidence and active participation among students.

"Now I feel braver to speak in front of the class. I'm no longer shy when giving a presentation or answering questions."

The "Clean School Movement" program also contributes positively to building students' discipline and environmental responsibility. One student shared:

"Now, after school, I'm used to picking up trash before going home. I feel more aware of my surroundings, and the school looks cleaner too."

This teacher also shared an initiative for creating a positive school culture by developing a collection of student-written rhyming, poems to support Islamic Education lessons. The collection has been used for more than four years and continues to enrich the classroom experience.

"At our school, I collect poems created by the students. Every student who presents must make one part. This book is part of the positive culture we implement at school."

Thus, the strategies and approaches applied by the Empowered Islamic Education Teacher not only improve academic performance but also strengthen student character and discipline, creating a fun, interactive, and holistically meaningful learning environment.

Challenges in Implementing New Learning Strategies

Although effective learning strategies have been implemented, Islamic Religious Education (Islamic Education) Teacher Leaders still face a number of challenges, both internal and external. One of the main challenges is maintaining self-motivation and managing emotions during the learning process.

"The biggest challenge I face is feeling lazy and bored. Sometimes we feel tired, especially after teaching for a long time. But, according to the Teacher Leader theory, when we feel lazy or bored, we need to pause, calm ourselves, and refresh our minds."

To overcome this fatigue, the teacher engages in self-reflection, such as calming down while students are working on assignments and creating a peaceful classroom atmosphere so that the mind can be refreshed and the enthusiasm to teach can return. Positive affirmations toward oneself and the environment are also considered very important.

"Another challenge is when we or others don't provide positive affirmations. A positive attitude is essential for maintaining enthusiasm and the continuity of the learning process. If we can face challenges with a positive mindset, every problem will feel easier to solve."

Another challenge stems from the students' learning motivation. The teacher explained that some students show low interest in learning and thus require a different approach. For instance, students with weaker academic abilities are not immediately given many tasks but are guided more intensively and grouped with diligent students so they can support each other.

"Usually, for those with low interest in learning, I don't give too many assignments, but focus more on mentoring. For example, I place academically weaker students with the diligent ones so they can be influenced positively."

Problems also arise when students feel that group work is unfair, especially when some members do not contribute. In such situations, the teacher provides advice that emphasizes the values of sincerity and the importance of sharing knowledge:

"If you complain about helping your friend, it means your knowledge is not being used beneficially. When you are able to help your friend, the one who truly understands is still you."

The teacher also guides high-achieving students to be willing to assist their peers who are struggling. They are made to understand that by helping others, they not only reinforce their own understanding but also become valuable individuals. Teachers often face challenges related to students' basic skills, such as reading and writing Arabic letters. In such cases, the teacher first applies a personal approach:

"If a student cannot read or write Arabic, I talk to them first. Usually, it's because they don't study the Qur'an at home. I record it in the student journal and coordinate with their parents or the counseling teacher. Later, they join the BTQ (Qur'an reading and writing) program and report back to me."

Through mentoring, observation, and documentation of student progress in journals, the teacher can provide targeted interventions. This reflects a serious commitment to ensuring that every student has an equal opportunity to grow.

Overall, the challenges faced by Islamic Religious Education Empowered Teachers include personal motivation, student learning enthusiasm, group work inequality, and basic skill

deficiencies. With a reflective, collaborative, and empathetic approach, the teacher is able to face these challenges in a solution-oriented way, creating an effective and enjoyable learning process.

DISCUSSION

مناقشة

The findings of this study indicate that the role of Islamic Education empowered teachers as pioneers of educational transformation in one junior high school in Garut is highly significant in improving students' learning abilities, both in academic achievement, attitudes, and skills. Empowered teachers act not only as instructors but also as facilitators, motivators, and mentors who provide direct guidance during the learning process (Nasrullah et al., 2024; Sandria et al., 2022). Their contribution is reflected in strong teacher-student relationships and the ability to stimulate learning motivation through humanistic, enjoyable, and inclusive approaches (Mulyasa, 2023). Furthermore, empowered teachers demonstrate sensitivity to students' diverse characteristics, including non-Muslim students who voluntarily attend Islamic Education classes without experiencing coercion. This role has a positive impact on character building, as students acknowledged that learning became more engaging while fostering discipline, responsibility, and willingness to share knowledge with peers. These findings affirm that empowered teachers contribute substantially not only to academic achievement but also to the formation of positive student behavior, thereby supporting holistic student development.

In terms of pedagogical practices, empowered teachers employ diverse and innovative strategies. They combine conventional teaching with contextual and digital-based approaches (Asmadi et al., 2024), such as utilizing TikTok as a learning platform (Usman et al., 2024), implementing educational games, and allowing students to demonstrate understanding through creative outputs including short stories, poems, rhymes, digital presentations, puzzles, and other media. These outputs reflect differentiated instruction (Fhitriansyah et al., 2024), which accommodates students' interests and learning preferences. One student reported that memorizing Qur'anic verses became easier when sung, while another appreciated the freedom to choose assignments aligned with personal interests. Such strategies increase student participation and demonstrate responsiveness to learners' needs.

The impact of these strategies is evident in students' higher engagement and improved comprehension of learning materials. Comprehensive assessment is conducted through formative and summative tests, as well as observation of students' attitudes and skills (Andayani & Madani, 2023). Assessment practices are adaptive and integrated with reflective learning, covering cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains (Sakinah & Sofa, 2025; Sefrina, 2025). Empowered teachers also observe students' performance in discussions, memorization practices, and presentations, enabling real-time evaluation and instructional adjustments.

Beyond classroom learning, empowered teachers also implement character-building activities, such as the "one student, one piece of trash" program, which requires students to pick up at least one piece of litter before leaving school. This initiative instills responsibility, cleanliness, and social awareness, while also integrating Islamic values into daily practices (Muhlis & Fitriani, 2025). Such programs contribute to the establishment of a positive school culture that supports student character development.

Nevertheless, empowered teachers face both internal and external challenges. Internally, maintaining motivation and emotional stability is a key challenge, particularly in relation to teacher burnout (Rahman & Hidayat, 2025). Reflective practices and positive affirmations are employed to maintain psychological balance (Hasanah et al., 2023; Wahyudi et al., 2024).

Externally, challenges arise from students' low motivation, group work imbalances, and limited basic Arabic literacy skills. To address these issues, empowered teachers adopt differentiated and empathetic approaches, such as intensive guidance, grouping based on learning characteristics, instilling sincerity in collaboration, and providing personalized interventions in cooperation with parents and counseling services (Noorjutstiatini et al., 2025; Salmiah et al., 2022; Yumna et al., 2025). These efforts reflect the application of empathetic pedagogy in sustaining effective and inclusive learning.

Practical Implications and Policy Recommendations

The role of empowered teachers in strengthening students' character also aligns with the reinforcement of Pancasila values and religious moderation. Such an approach is essential in addressing intolerance and radicalism among adolescents. By promoting contextual and humanistic Islamic Education, empowered teachers serve not only as classroom change agents but also as contributors to broader social transformation.

The findings of this study suggest several implications:

1. The learning model implemented by empowered teachers emphasizes sincerity, consistency, and exemplary conduct, beyond teaching methods. This confirms that educational transformation begins with empowered and dedicated teachers. Training programs in digital pedagogy, creative learning, and humanistic approaches should therefore be expanded.
2. School-level habituation programs, such as "one student, one piece of trash," should be institutionalized to build positive school culture and student character.
3. Government support is needed to strengthen teacher capacity through continuous professional development, collaborative supervision, and platforms for sharing best practices.

In conclusion, strengthening the synergy between teacher innovation, supportive policies, and community engagement will enable empowered teachers to serve as a model of character education transformation relevant to the Indonesian context. This study contributes theoretically and practically to understanding how empowered teachers transform Islamic Education from value transmission into a participatory and transformative process. Further research involving more diverse contexts and participants will enrich insights into the strategic contributions of empowered teachers within the national education system.

CONCLUSION | خاتمة

Overall, it can be concluded that empowered Islamic Education teachers in junior high schools play a strategic role in shaping students' religious character and enhancing their learning abilities through innovative and responsive approaches, including the use of songs to aid memorization, hands-on practice in understanding Qur'anic verses, integration of social activities such as GERSIH to instill responsibility, and the creation of pantun (rhymed poems) to foster creativity and positive culture. These strategies have demonstrated significant impact not only on formative and summative test results but also on students' active participation, self-confidence, discipline, and environmental awareness. However, teachers still encounter substantial challenges such as personal fatigue, lack of positive affirmation, low student motivation, unequal contribution in group work, and limited Arabic literacy skills. To overcome these obstacles, they conduct self-reflection, apply individual approaches, provide group guidance, and coordinate with parents as well as counseling teachers, ensuring that each student experiences fair, inclusive, and meaningful learning.

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