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Teacher Efforts to Overcome Students' Learning Difficulties in Islamic Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study investigates the efforts of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers to overcome students' learning difficulties at SMP Negeri 1 Pekanbaru, Riau Province, Indonesia. Despite teacher efforts, persistent symptoms of learning difficulties—including slow task completion, low academic achievement among ostensibly active students, and difficulty comprehending instructional material—motivated systematic investigation of applied pedagogical strategies.

Materials and methods: A qualitative descriptive research design was employed. The study involved three IRE teachers as key informants, supplemented by the school principal, vice-principal for student affairs, and counseling teachers as supporting informants. Data were collected through structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Interactive model data analysis (Miles & Huberman) encompassed data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Results: Of fourteen identified teacher-effort indicators, five were consistently well-implemented: (1) reviewing students' personal records, (2) evaluating student assignments to monitor development, (3) identifying learning difficulty cases, (4) organizing instructional materials systematically, and (5) administering remedial programmes. Nine remaining indicators were partially implemented, including home visits, comparative progress monitoring, individualized/group tutoring, and parental collaboration.

Conclusions: IRE teachers at SMPN 1 Pekanbaru have adopted several structured efforts to address student learning difficulties; however, implementation remains incomplete. Gaps in home visitation and individualized tutoring indicate systemic resource and time constraints. Strengthening teacher professional development and institutional support systems is recommended to close implementation gaps.

Keywords

Islamic Religious Education; learning difficulties; teacher efforts; remedial teaching; qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

Learning difficulties represent one of the most persistent challenges confronting educational systems globally, particularly within religious and values-based education contexts. In the Indonesian national education system, Islamic Religious Education (IRE/PAI—Pendidikan Agama Islam) occupies a mandatory position across all educational levels, charged with nurturing students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor competencies in Islamic faith and practice (Undang-Undang Sisdiknas No. 20, 2003). Nevertheless, IRE practitioners frequently encounter students who, despite active participation, fail to achieve expected learning outcomes—a phenomenon consistent with international definitions of learning difficulties.

Learning difficulty (LD), first formally defined by the United States Office of Education (USOE) in 1977 under Public Law 94-142, denotes a disorder in one or more basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, manifesting in impaired listening, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or mathematical computation (Hallahan et al., 2005; Abdurrahman, 2012). The National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) subsequently refined this to emphasize intrinsic, neurologically-based difficulties that may co-occur with other disabling conditions or environmental influences but are not primarily caused by them (Abdurrahman, 2009).

SMP Negeri 1 Pekanbaru, established in 1951 and rated Grade A (Accreditation Score: 99/2016), represents one of the most distinguished junior secondary institutions in Riau Province. Yet despite its institutional excellence, preliminary observations identified recurrent learning difficulty symptoms among its IRE students: tardiness in completing learning tasks, active participation coexisting with low achievement, and consistent difficulty comprehending instructional material.

Critical Examination of Existing Literature

Theoretical foundations for this study draw from multiple scholarly traditions. Djamarah (2011) delineates a six-stage framework for overcoming learning difficulties—data collection, data processing, diagnosis, prognosis, treatment, and evaluation—providing a structured diagnostic model applicable within school settings. Syah (2003) categorises LD causes into internal factors (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor deficits) and external factors (family environment, school conditions, and socio-cultural milieu).

Within the IRE domain, Ahmad and Tambak (2017) demonstrated that instructional method selection significantly influences student engagement and learning outcomes in Islamic education, while Hamzah et al. (2017) underscored the centrality of teacher competency in shaping students' Islamic character formation. Harahap (2017) contributed to understanding of student developmental needs, emphasising the holistic conceptualisation of students as individuals in continuous physical, mental, and cognitive growth.

Empirically, Noviana (2015) examined teacher efforts to overcome LD in IRE at SDN 21 Pekanbaru, identifying systemic gaps in individualised support. Herman Faidi (2014) investigated teacher strategies in Fiqh instruction at the vocational level, while Muntari (2015) documented LD interventions within primary Islamic education in Surabaya. These studies converge on a consistent finding: while IRE teachers employ diverse strategies, implementation quality and comprehensiveness vary substantially across institutional contexts.

Identification of Research Gaps

Despite the growing body of literature on LD in Indonesian Islamic education, several critical gaps remain. First, no study has examined LD interventions at SMPN 1 Pekanbaru specifically, a school context characterised by high institutional prestige yet persistent student learning challenges. Second, existing studies largely lack systematic indicator-based evaluation frameworks that permit assessment of implementation completeness. Third, the intersection of IRE-specific pedagogical strategies with broader LD intervention theory remains theoretically underdeveloped. Fourth, the role of parental and multi-stakeholder collaboration in IRE LD remediation has received limited empirical attention.

Rationale for the Research

Understanding how IRE teachers operationalise LD intervention strategies is essential for several reasons. Pedagogically, teacher effort directly determines the quality of student support within the classroom ecosystem. Institutionally, schools require evidence-based documentation of teacher practices to guide professional development programmes. Nationally, the Indonesian Ministry of Education's commitment to inclusive and quality education necessitates rigorous evaluation of instructional effectiveness across all subject domains, including religious education. This study addresses these imperatives by providing systematic, indicator-based documentation of teacher practices at a nationally recognised institution.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to identify and describe the specific efforts employed by IRE teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Pekanbaru to overcome students' learning difficulties, evaluated against fourteen theoretically-derived indicators. Secondary objectives include: (i) assessing the degree to which each intervention strategy is consistently implemented; (ii) identifying barriers to full implementation; and (iii) generating actionable recommendations for institutional improvement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Participants

The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Pekanbaru, Jalan Sultan Syarif Kasim No. 157, Kecamatan Limapuluh, Pekanbaru, Riau Province, Indonesia—a public junior secondary school founded in 1951, with Grade A national accreditation (Score: 99/2016). The institution enrolls students across Grades VII–IX (approximately 11–15 years of age) and employs a faculty that includes three certified IRE teachers.

Participants were purposively selected based on their direct relevance to the research phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Key informants comprised all three IRE teachers currently teaching at SMPN 1 Pekanbaru: Bapak Abdulah Sani, M.Pd.I; Bapak Rusmadi, M.Pd.I; and Bapak Misbahuddin, S.Pd.I—each with substantive classroom teaching experience in IRE at the junior secondary level. Supporting informants included the school principal (Ibu Hj. Ade Armi, M.Pd.), the vice-principal for student affairs, and the guidance and counseling teacher, whose institutional perspectives enriched triangulation of findings.

Table 1. Research Participant Profile

No.	Name	Role	Qualification	Informant Type
1	Abdulah Sani	IRE Teacher	M.Pd.I	Key
2	Rusmadi	IRE Teacher	M.Pd.I	Key
3	Misbahuddin	IRE Teacher	S.Pd.I	Key
4	Hj. Ade Armi	Principal	M.Pd.	Supporting
5	Vice-Principal	Student Affairs	—	Supporting
6	Counseling Teacher	BK Teacher	—	Supporting

Study Organisation and Methodological Framework

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, consistent with interpretive epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was selected because the research objective—understanding the quality and nature of teacher efforts in context—is inherently interpretive and not amenable to quantification alone.

The research instrument was the researcher as primary instrument (Satori, 2014), supported by: (i) a structured interview guide containing fourteen thematic questions corresponding to the operational indicators of teacher effort in overcoming LD; (ii) an observation protocol for systematic classroom and institutional observation; and (iii) a documentation checklist for archival and artefactual data.

Data collection proceeded in three stages. First, structured interviews (semi-open format) were conducted individually with all three IRE teachers, audio-recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Second, non-participant observation was conducted across multiple IRE class sessions to assess actual pedagogical practice. Third, documentary evidence—including student attitude journals (*jurnal sikap*), personal student data records, remedial documentation, lesson plans (RPP), and academic

transcripts—was systematically reviewed.

The procedural algorithm for the study followed a three-phase sequence: (1) Pre-field preparation, including ethical approval, instrument validation, and informant recruitment; (2) Field data collection, encompassing interviews, observations, and documentary review; and (3) Post-field analysis, incorporating the interactive model of qualitative analysis (Miles et al., 2014).

Operational indicators for assessing teacher efforts were derived from Djamarah's (2011) theoretical framework and structured into fourteen criteria spanning data collection (home visits, personal records review, assignment evaluation, case study, group task analysis, testing), data processing (case identification, cross-case comparison, result comparison, diagnostic conclusion), diagnosis and prognosis (identification of difficulty type and causative factors), and treatment/evaluation (material organisation, method selection, scheduling, individual and group tutoring, parental collaboration, remedial administration, KKM-based assessment, and evaluation).

Statistical Analysis

Given the qualitative nature of this study, statistical analysis in the conventional sense was not applied. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (2014) interactive model comprising three iterative components: (1) Data Reduction—systematic condensation of raw interview, observational, and documentary data through thematic coding aligned with the fourteen research indicators; (2) Data Display—structured presentation of condensed data in narrative, tabular, and categorical formats enabling pattern recognition; and (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification—generation of initial analytical conclusions subjected to ongoing verification through member-checking, negative case analysis, and cross-informant triangulation.

Trustworthiness was established through methodological triangulation (interview × observation × documentation), source triangulation (three teacher-informants × supporting informants), and prolonged engagement in the field context. Transferability was enhanced through thick description of the institutional context and participant characteristics.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical endorsement from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Islam Riau (UIR), Faculty of Islamic Studies (Ethical Clearance Reference: FAI-UIR-EC-2024-159). All participants provided voluntary informed consent prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed of the study purpose, their right to withdraw without penalty, data confidentiality protocols, and the intended use of research findings for academic publication and institutional improvement. Data were anonymised where appropriate to protect institutional and individual privacy. School access was granted by the principal under formal institutional permission letter. No conflicts of interest were identified in the research process.

RESULTS

The findings are presented in alignment with the fourteen operational indicators of teacher effort in overcoming students' learning difficulties in IRE, structured by Djamarah's (2011) six-stage framework. Results are derived from cross-informant triangulation of interview data, observational records, and documentary evidence.

Implementation Summary of Teacher Effort Indicators

Table 2. Implementation Status of IRE Teacher Effort Indicators at SMPN 1 Pekanbaru

No.	Stage	Indicator	Informants Confirming	Implementation
1	Data Collection	Home visits to students' residences	1/3	Partial
2	Data Collection	Review of students' personal records / attitude journals	3/3	Well-Implemented ✓
3	Data Collection	Evaluation of students' assignments to track development	3/3	Well-Implemented ✓
4	Data Collection	Written and oral testing	3/3	Partial
5	Data Processing	Identification of individual learning difficulty cases	3/3	Well-Implemented ✓
6	Data Processing	Comparative progress monitoring (before vs. after)	3/3	Partial
7	Diagnosis	Recognition of general internal/external causative factors	3/3	Partial
8	Prognosis	Systematic organisation of instructional materials	3/3	Well-Implemented ✓
9	Treatment	Selection of appropriate teaching methods	3/3	Partial
10	Treatment	Time scheduling and task deadlines for students	3/3	Partial
11	Treatment	Individual and group tutoring/guidance	2/3	Partial
12	Treatment	Collaborative guidance with parents/guardians	2/3	Partial
13	Evaluation	Remedial programme for below-KKM students	3/3	Well-Implemented ✓
14	Evaluation	Enrichment/assessment for KKM-achieving students	3/3	Partial

Note: KKM = *Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal* (Minimum Competency Criteria). Well-Implemented = consistently practised by all three teachers across observation cycles and corroborated by documentary evidence; Partial = practised intermittently or by fewer than all three teachers.

Well-Implemented Indicators: Detailed Findings

Indicator 2 — Review of Personal Records: All three IRE teachers maintained mandatory student attitude journals (*jurnal sikap*), enabling ongoing monitoring of behavioural and academic developments. Teacher A (Abdulah Sani) confirmed: 'Examining personal records makes it easier for me to recognise each student, particularly in diagnosing learning difficulties.' This was corroborated by documentary review, which confirmed consistent maintenance of attitude journals across academic terms.

Indicator 3 — Assignment Evaluation: All teachers reported systematic evaluation of student assignments as a primary formative assessment mechanism. Assignment review enabled identification of cognitive gaps and differentiated feedback provision. Observational data confirmed regular collection and grading of written assignments, with feedback notes returned to students.

Indicator 5 — Case Identification: Teachers employed multiple case-identification strategies, including analysis of report card grades, daily assessment scores, examination results, memorisation performance, and parental reports. Teacher C (Misbahuddin) articulated: 'I analyse which tasks students fail to complete and which basic competencies remain incomplete after assessments.'

Indicator 8 — Instructional Material Organisation: All teachers prepared structured lesson plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran/RPP*) incorporating competency standards, student ability levels, and differentiated material sequencing. Teacher B (Rusmadi) described material compilation as serving three institutional functions: representing teacher instruction, achieving competency standards, and optimising student service delivery.

Indicator 13 — Remedial Programme: Remedial teaching was consistently implemented for students whose scores fell below the Minimum Competency Criteria (KKM). The remedial approach was student-centred: students self-determined readiness timing, and teachers provided targeted re-teaching of unmastered

competencies. All three teachers confirmed mandatory institutional implementation of remedial programmes aligned with Curriculum 2013.

Partially Implemented Indicators: Detailed Findings

Home visits (Indicator 1) were conducted inconsistently: Teacher C (Misbahuddin) confirmed undertaking home visits for students with severe behavioural issues (truancy, chronic lateness), while Teachers A and B delegated this function primarily to school counselors (Guru BK), preferring to summon parents to school instead. Individual/group tutoring (Indicator 11) was consistently practised by Teachers A and C, but Teacher B had not yet established formal tutoring structures, noting plans for implementation in the subsequent semester. Parental collaboration (Indicator 12) was common for academically at-risk students, but Teacher B reported limiting this to academic mentoring within school premises rather than coordinated home-school learning plans.

Method selection (Indicator 9) was adaptive across teachers—demonstration for ablution practice (wudhu), lecture for prophetic histories, and discussion/Q&A for contemporary issues—but systematic differentiation based on individual learning difficulty profiles was not consistently documented. Progress comparison (Indicator 6) relied primarily on quantitative score tracking rather than qualitative longitudinal monitoring, representing a methodological gap in formative assessment practice.

Summary Visualisation

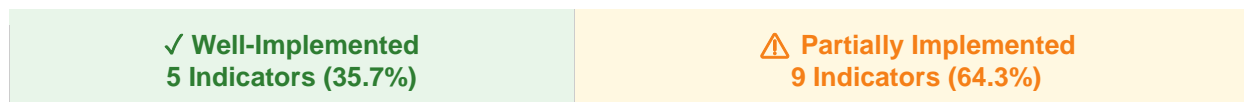


Figure 1. Implementation Rate of Teacher Effort Indicators

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the Research Outcomes

The central finding of this study—that only five of fourteen theoretically-derived indicators were consistently implemented—reveals a significant gap between the theoretical framework for LD intervention (Djamarah, 2011) and actual classroom and institutional practice. This gap is not indicative of teacher negligence, but rather reflects the structural constraints of a high-enrolment public school environment where teacher-student ratios limit individualised attention and administrative responsibilities encroach upon instructional preparation time.

The five well-implemented indicators—personal record review, assignment evaluation, case identification, material organisation, and remedial administration—share a common characteristic: they are institutionally mandated, formally documented, and subject to administrative oversight. The attitude journal (*jurnal sikap*), for instance, is a compulsory Curriculum 2013 artefact, which explains its universal adoption. This institutional incentive structure aligns with Fullan's (2007) observation that educational reforms are most durably adopted when they are supported by systemic accountability mechanisms.

Evaluation in Relation to Antecedent Studies

These findings are broadly consistent with Noviana (2015), who identified similar gaps in individualised LD support within IRE at the primary level in Pekanbaru, and Muntari (2015), who found that data collection and diagnostic stages were better implemented than treatment and follow-up stages. Herman Faidi (2014) likewise documented that while teachers at the vocational level demonstrated awareness of LD, structured remediation was inconsistently applied across all student groups.

International comparative perspectives offer additional insight. Kavale and Forness (2000) identified that teacher-directed interventions in LD contexts are most effective when they combine direct instruction with formative monitoring—precisely the combination represented by the five well-implemented indicators in this study. Wong et al. (2017) further demonstrated that parental collaboration enhances LD intervention outcomes, underscoring the significance of the partially implemented Indicator 12 as a priority for development.

The finding that home visits were conducted by only one of three teachers diverges from the systematic home-school engagement advocated by Epstein (2011), whose framework of school-family-community partnerships identifies home visits as a core strategy for addressing attendance-related and environmental learning barriers. The delegation of home visits to school counselors, while pragmatic, may inadvertently create communication silos that reduce the IRE teachers' holistic understanding of individual students' home-learning ecologies.

Implications of the Findings

These findings carry several implications. For institutional policy, the data suggest a need to formalise and monitor the full spectrum of LD intervention activities—not only those captured in existing administrative documentation. School leaders might consider developing a structured LD Management Protocol that operationalises all fourteen indicators and tracks teacher compliance through periodic audit.

For teacher professional development, the findings identify individualised tutoring design, parental engagement strategies, and longitudinal progress comparison as priority competency areas. Pre-service and in-service training programmes for IRE teachers in Indonesia should incorporate modules on differentiated instruction, formative assessment literacy, and collaborative home-school engagement.

For curriculum and policy, the findings reveal a tension between the content density of the Curriculum 2013 IRE syllabus and the time available for individualised LD support. Teacher B's observation that 'the material is too dense and the time given is limited' points to a systemic curriculum design challenge that extends beyond individual teacher capacity.

Limitations of the Research

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted at a single institution; findings may not transfer to schools with different resource profiles, student demographics, or institutional cultures. Second, qualitative data collection is susceptible to social desirability bias, as informants may report idealized rather than actual practices. Although observational and documentary triangulation mitigated this risk, it cannot be entirely eliminated. Third, the study's cross-sectional design captures a

temporal snapshot rather than longitudinal implementation patterns. Fourth, student perspectives—arguably the most direct evidence of teacher intervention effectiveness—were not included, representing a significant direction for future inquiry.

CONCLUSION

This study systematically examined the efforts of three Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Pekanbaru to overcome students' learning difficulties, evaluated against fourteen theoretically grounded operational indicators. The principal conclusion is that while IRE teachers at this institution have adopted meaningful and structured responses to student learning difficulties, implementation remains incomplete: five indicators were consistently well-implemented and nine were only partially implemented.

The five consistently implemented strategies—maintaining student personal records, evaluating assignments, identifying learning difficulty cases, organising instructional materials, and administering remedial programmes—reflect the positive impact of institutional mandates and administrative accountability mechanisms. The nine partially implemented strategies—including home visits, individualised tutoring, parental collaboration, and comparative progress monitoring—represent areas requiring prioritised professional and institutional support.

These findings contribute to the empirical literature on IRE pedagogy and LD intervention in Indonesian Islamic education by providing the first indicator-based assessment of teacher efforts at SMPN 1 Pekanbaru. They corroborate the findings of Noviana (2015), Herman Faidi (2014), and Muntari (2015) regarding implementation gaps in LD intervention across educational levels and contexts, while extending these analyses to a nationally accredited secondary school setting. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are advanced: (1) School administrators should develop and implement a formal LD Management Protocol encompassing all fourteen indicators, with regular monitoring and teacher support; (2) IRE teachers should receive targeted professional development in areas of individualised tutoring design, longitudinal formative assessment, and collaborative home-school partnership; (3) The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag) and Ministry of Education should review Curriculum 2013 IRE content density to create adequate instructional space for differentiated LD interventions; (4) Future research should employ longitudinal mixed-methods designs, incorporate student-reported outcome measures, and extend comparative analysis across multiple institutional contexts.

In conclusion, improving teacher capacity and institutional support for LD intervention in Islamic Religious Education is not merely a pedagogical imperative—it is a matter of educational equity and the realisation of Indonesia's constitutional commitment to quality education for all citizens.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Universitas Islam Riau's Faculty of Islamic Studies Research Ethics Committee.

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