

Islamic Pedagogical Approach in Strengthening Positive Self-Concept among Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Muhimmatul Hasanah^{1*}, Ahmad Iwan Zunaih², Ima Fitri Sholichah³, Nur Amanina Mohd Asri⁴

¹ Universitas Sunan Drajat, Indonesia; muhimmatulhasanah@unsuda.ac.id

² Universitas Sunan Drajat, Indonesia; iwanzunaihinsud@gmail.com

³ Universitas Muhammadiyah Gresik, Indonesia; ima_fitri@umg.ac.id

⁴ Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia; p144355@siswa.ukm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

This study explores how Islamic Religious Education teachers apply Islamic pedagogical principles to strengthen positive self-concept among students with intellectual disabilities (tunagrahita) at SLB Negeri Cerme Gresik, Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with phenomenological analysis, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal three key strategies employed by teachers: (1) the use of mawaddah wa rahmah (compassionate pedagogy) to create a supportive emotional environment; (2) personalized instruction and simple religious habituation that build self-confidence and self-worth; and (3) modeling and Islamic reinforcement that cultivate spiritual awareness. The results align with Rogers' theory of positive self-concept and Islamic educational principles such as tarbiyah ruhaniyah (spiritual nurturing) and tazkiyatun nafs (self-purification). Teachers act as murabbi, spiritual mentors who guide students toward realizing their divine potential and innate fitrah. The study contributes to the development of inclusive Islamic education by integrating positive psychology with Islamic pedagogy, emphasizing that rahmah-based education can foster both spiritual and psychological empowerment for learners with special needs.

Keywords: Inclusive Islamic Education, Intellectual Disability, Islamic Pedagogy, Murabbi, Self-Concept

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INTRODUCTION

Students with intellectual disabilities (ID), known in Indonesia as *tunagrahita*, often experience challenges in developing a positive self-concept due to their cognitive, social, and emotional limitations. A negative self-concept can lead to low self-esteem, dependency, withdrawal, and difficulty in social adjustment, which ultimately hinders their learning outcomes and personal growth (Carson, 1986). In inclusive and special education settings, such as *Sekolah Luar Biasa* (SLB), these students require educational approaches that not only accommodate their intellectual capacity but also nurture their sense of self-worth and dignity as human beings. Within Islamic education contexts, the Islamic Religious Education teachers hold a strategic role in fostering students' moral, emotional, and spiritual development. Beyond the transmission of religious knowledge, *PAI* teachers act as spiritual educators who guide students toward the formation of an ideal self that reflects *akhlaq karimah* (noble character). Islamic pedagogy emphasizes holistic development, intellectual (*'aql*), spiritual (*ruh*), and moral (*nafs*), which aligns with the Islamic vision of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for all creation). This principle positions every learner, including those with disabilities, as dignified individuals worthy of respect, compassion, and educational equity (Al-Attas, 1999); (Abdillah et al., 2025a). Therefore, the cultivation of a positive self-concept among students with intellectual disabilities must be approached through pedagogical practices that integrate Islamic values of love, empathy, and self-awareness.

The construct of self-concept has long been discussed in psychological and educational literature. Recent studies view self-concept as a multidimensional construct closely linked to students' motivation, resilience, and emotional adjustment, highlighting its central role in personal and social development (Ramirez-Granizo et al., 2020). Coopersmith (Carson, 1986) later emphasized that positive self-concept correlates strongly with self-esteem and social competence. Marsh and Shavelson refined the multidimensional model of self-concept, suggesting that it encompasses academic, social, and emotional domains that interact dynamically within educational environments (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985).

In the realm of Islamic thought, classical scholars such as Al-Ghazali (2019) and Ibn Khaldun (1967) (*Muqaddimah*) highlighted the significance of education in shaping moral and spiritual identity. Al-Ghazali proposed that the purification of the soul (*tazkiyatun nafs*) leads to self-awareness, humility, and self-confidence rooted in faith. Ibn Khaldun viewed education as a transformative process that nurtures both rational intellect and ethical consciousness. Contemporary Islamic education scholars (Afif, 2025) have expanded these perspectives by linking them to modern pedagogical and psychological frameworks, particularly in developing character education models that integrate faith and behavior. However, empirical studies that bridge the domains of Islamic pedagogy and the psychological development of students with intellectual disabilities remain limited. Most existing research in special education focuses on cognitive or behavioral interventions rather than spiritual and self-conceptual development. Conversely, Islamic educational studies often concentrate on mainstream learners, overlooking the inclusion of children with special needs in religious learning.

This study fills a critical research gap by integrating Islamic pedagogical principles with positive psychology in the context of special education. It explores how Islamic Religious Education teachers apply spiritual, moral, and emotional strategies to enhance students' positive self-concept. The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, merging Islamic education, inclusive pedagogy, and educational psychology, to propose a holistic framework for nurturing self-worth and identity among intellectually disabled learners. This integration aligns with the broader movement toward humanistic and inclusive Islamic education, where pedagogical compassion and individualized instruction serve as tools for character empowerment. This study aims to (1) describe the Islamic pedagogical approaches implemented by PAI teachers in teaching students with intellectual disabilities; (2) analyze the role of PAI teachers in fostering positive self-concept among students with intellectual disabilities; (3) identify the Islamic values and pedagogical principles that strengthen self-awareness, confidence, and identity in intellectually disabled students.

METHOD

Research Design. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in strengthening positive self-concept among students with intellectual disabilities. The qualitative paradigm was selected because it allows for a deep understanding of participants' perspectives, contextual meanings, and pedagogical practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through phenomenology, the research sought to capture how Islamic pedagogical principles are experienced, internalized, and implemented by teachers in inclusive educational settings. The focus was not on measuring variables quantitatively but on describing and interpreting the patterns of meaning within the teachers' instructional behavior, language, and attitudes in guiding students. The descriptive nature of this study also aligns with its aim to present authentic classroom realities within an Islamic educational framework.

Research Site and Participants. The research was conducted at SLB Negeri Cerme Gresik, East Java, Indonesia, a government-supported special education institution that accommodates students with various disabilities, including intellectual disabilities (*tunagrahita*). The selection of this school was based on its integration of religious education as a core element of its inclusive curriculum. Participants consisted of three Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers who have taught students with intellectual disabilities for at least three years, one school principal, and two parents of students. The selection of participants used purposive sampling, ensuring that those involved had substantial experience and engagement in the process of Islamic religious instruction for students with special needs (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection Techniques. To ensure a rich and reliable data set, three main techniques were used: (1) Observation: Direct classroom observations were conducted to examine teachers' pedagogical interactions, use of Islamic materials, and strategies that foster students' confidence and self-awareness. Observations focused on the daily teaching routines, classroom climate, and behavioral

indicators of self-concept (Miles & Huberman, 2014). (2) In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were carried out with *PAI* teachers, the school principal, and parents. The interviews explored their perceptions of self-concept development, pedagogical challenges, and the integration of Islamic values such as *rahmah*, *ikhlas*, and *tazkiyah*. Interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to articulate experiences freely and reflectively. (3) Documentation Analysis: Relevant documents such as lesson plans (RPP), school curricula, student progress reports, and teacher reflection notes were reviewed to complement observational and interview data. These documents provided contextual evidence of how Islamic pedagogy is operationalized in practice. All data were recorded using field notes and audio recordings, with participant consent obtained before data collection in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data Analysis Procedures. The collected data were analyzed using the Miles & Huberman (1994) interactive model, which includes three major stages: (1) Data Reduction: Identifying, coding, and categorizing key themes related to Islamic pedagogical practices, self-concept formation, and moral-spiritual integration. (2) Data Display: Presenting the organized data in matrices and narrative summaries to illustrate patterns and relationships among categories. (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Interpreting findings by linking empirical evidence to theoretical frameworks in Islamic education and educational psychology. To enhance validity, data triangulation was employed across the three data sources (observation, interviews, and documentation). Member checking was conducted by sharing summarized interpretations with participants to confirm accuracy and authenticity (Lincoln, & Guba (1985). *Ethical Considerations.* Ethical approval was obtained from STAI Darul Falah. Participants gave written informed consent before data collection. This methodological design ensured the reliability, validity, and credibility of findings by systematically capturing the depth of teacher experiences in integrating Islamic pedagogy and positive psychology for learners with intellectual disabilities. The next section elaborates on the key results and discussions that emerged from this empirical inquiry (ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

The findings of this research are organized into three major themes that emerged from observation, interviews, and documentation analysis conducted at SLB Negeri Cerme Gresik. Each theme reflects how Islamic pedagogical principles are operationalized by Islamic Religious Education (*PAI*) teachers to strengthen the positive self-concept of students with intellectual disabilities.

Implementation of Compassionate Pedagogy (*Marwaddah wa Rahmah*)

Observation data revealed that *PAI* teachers consistently demonstrated emotional warmth, empathy, and patience in their interactions with students. Teachers frequently used gentle verbal reinforcement such as “*MasyaAllah, kamu hebat hari ini*” (“*MasyaAllah, you did great today*”) or “Allah loves children who keep trying”. These expressions not only motivated students but also created a psychologically safe learning environment.

Interview excerpts reinforced this finding. One teacher (T1) expressed:

"Children with tunagrahita need to feel loved before they can learn. I always start my class by greeting them warmly, touching their shoulders, and reminding them that Allah loves every effort they make."

This pedagogical affection aligns with the Islamic value of *rahmah* (compassion) as emphasized in the Qur'an (Al-Anbiya: 107), "And We have not sent you, except as a mercy to the worlds." Al-Ghazali argued that mercy in education (*tarbiyah bil rahmah*) purifies the heart and nurtures humility in both teacher and student, thereby strengthening spiritual and emotional well-being. From a psychological perspective, Rogers' concept of unconditional positive regard is evident in how teachers validate students' efforts rather than focusing on their limitations. This acceptance helps students develop a positive self-concept, as they begin to internalize the belief that they are valued individuals capable of growth despite their intellectual challenges.

Personalized Instruction and Religious Habituation as a Means to Strengthen Self-Esteem

The second major finding indicates that personalized learning and habitual religious practices significantly contribute to students' self-confidence and self-recognition as capable learners. Teachers modified instructional materials according to students' abilities, using pictorial Qur'anic stories, tactile media, and repetitive simple dzikir exercises such as "*Subhanallah*" and "*Alhamdulillah*".

Field observation showed that one teacher (T2) divided the class into small groups based on comprehension levels. Students with lower comprehension were guided through short prayer movements, while higher-functioning students practiced reading short verses from *Surah Al-Ikhlās*. Each achievement, no matter how minor, was rewarded with praise and a smile.

One parent (P1) noted in an interview:

"My child used to be shy and refused to pray. Now, he reminds me at home to say Bismillah before eating. The teacher says this habit helps him feel close to Allah."

This demonstrates that repetition of simple religious rituals fosters a sense of mastery and identity as a Muslim, which elevates self-esteem and internal motivation. According to Coopersmith, self-esteem arises when individuals experience consistent approval and success within their environment. In the Islamic pedagogical framework, these practices embody '*amal saleh* (good deeds) and *ta'dib* (disciplining the self toward virtue). Ibn Khaldun viewed such habituation as essential in moral formation because actions repeated over time shape stable character traits. Thus, the teacher's method of religious habituation serves not only a spiritual purpose but also a psychological one, cultivating confidence, belonging, and self-respect among students with intellectual disabilities.

Modeling and Islamic Reinforcement to Cultivate Spiritual Awareness

The third theme highlights the role of teacher modeling (*uswah hasanah*) and positive reinforcement based on Islamic values in nurturing students' self-awareness and spiritual connection. Teachers consistently served as role models during daily activities, performing ablution with students, praying together, and exemplifying politeness and gratitude. Observation during Dhuha prayer sessions showed that students imitated their teachers' gestures attentively. When a student

completed the prayer, the teacher smiled and said, “Alhamdulillah, you prayed so calmly today. Allah is proud of you.” This type of feedback reinforces both spiritual behavior and self-worth, linking religious accomplishment with emotional satisfaction.

Islamic reinforcement, through expressions of gratitude, prayer, and moral acknowledgment, stimulates intrinsic motivation grounded in faith (*iman*). It transforms learning from an externally imposed duty into a self-driven process of *taqarrub* (closeness to Allah). From a psychological standpoint, this aligns with Bandura’s theory of social learning, which posits that individuals develop self-efficacy through observing and imitating role models. In this context, the teacher acts as a spiritual and behavioral model who demonstrates attainable success in faith-based actions.

Therefore, the integration of Islamic modeling and moral reinforcement supports both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, promoting not only spiritual consciousness but also a positive internalized identity. As one teacher (T3) stated:

“When students see me perform ablution or pray, they begin to follow, not because I tell them to, but because they feel it’s meaningful. That is when real learning happens.”

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that Islamic Religious Education teachers at SLB Negeri Cerme Gresik foster positive self-concept among students with intellectual disabilities through compassion-centered pedagogy (*mawaddah wa rahmah*), personalized instruction, and spiritual habituation. These practices resonate strongly with (Rogers, 1959) humanistic theory of self-concept, particularly his concepts of positive regard and self-worth. Rogers argued that individuals develop a positive self-concept when they experience unconditional acceptance and empathy from significant others, such as teachers or caregivers. The consistent demonstration of affection, patience, and moral exemplarity by PAI teachers serves as a medium of “unconditional positive regard,” reinforcing students’ sense of value and competence despite their cognitive limitations. Similar findings were observed in inclusive educational studies by Gabriel (2025) and Karal et al., (2025), which highlighted that positive teacher–student relationships are crucial for enhancing self-esteem and social adjustment among learners with special needs.

This finding is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of affective relationships in shaping the self-concept of children with intellectual disabilities. Democratic and responsive parenting patterns create emotional security and reinforce self-worth, which parallels the unconditional positive regard framework of Rogers (1959). For instance, a study conducted at SLB C Kemala Bhayangkari 2 Gresik found that democratic parenting significantly correlated with prosocial success among students with mild intellectual disabilities (Risfi et.al. 2020). Similarly, Amelasasih & Hasanah (2022) revealed that responsive parenting practices foster autonomy and self-confidence in the daily activities of children with intellectual disabilities. These findings affirm that supportive

interpersonal environments, whether in the family or school context, are vital in nurturing positive self-concept and moral behavior among special-needs learners.

From an Islamic pedagogical perspective, these findings align with the classical concept of *tarbiyah ruhaniyah* (spiritual education) and *tazkiyatun nafs* (self-purification), as articulated by Al-Ghazali (2019) and further contextualized by Sodikin (2025) and Ruswandi (2025). The aim of *tazkiyah* is not merely moral correction but the cultivation of self-awareness (*ma'rifah al-nafs*) and recognition of one's divine potential as 'abdullah (servant of God). Within this framework, the teacher assumes the role of *murabbi*, a nurturer of both intellect and soul, who guides students toward realizing their innate *fitrah* (pure nature). As such, the pedagogical compassion shown by PAI teachers mirrors Islamic education's holistic vision: integrating cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions to achieve *insan kamil* (the complete human).

In this study, spiritual modeling and reinforcement of simple acts of worship (e.g., prayer, gratitude, and *dhikr*) became central to developing positive self-concept. These acts contribute to the students' sense of agency and belonging, affirming their worth before God and their community. This is consistent with (Masuwai et al., 2024), who found that Islamic teachers' reflective and value-based practices significantly enhance learners' spiritual confidence and intrinsic motivation. Moreover, (Abdillah et al., 2025) emphasized that integrating religious character education into inclusive classrooms supports not only moral growth but also emotional resilience and identity formation among disabled students.

The discussion further underscores the teacher's function as a *murabbi* and *uswah hasanah* (moral exemplar), which extends beyond conventional pedagogy into moral-spiritual mentorship. This is echoed in Fakhruddin et al., (2025) and Riza & Ariani, (2025), who argue that the self-concept of Islamic education teachers strongly influences their ability to model values that foster student self-belief. For intellectually disabled learners, such modeling bridges the affective and cognitive gap, transforming religious instruction into an experiential process of self-discovery and empowerment.

Consequently, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive Islamic education by proposing an integrative model that synthesizes Rogers' positive psychology with Islamic pedagogy. It situates Rahmah-based pedagogy as a bridge between emotional security and spiritual development, offering a humanistic yet theocentric approach to special education. This aligns with the paradigm of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, which affirms that education must reflect divine compassion toward all learners, regardless of ability. As suggested by Putra et al., (2021) and Afif (2025), inclusive Islamic education must emphasize moral empathy and individualized learning to ensure equitable participation and holistic character formation.

Thus, the integration of *tarbiyah ruhaniyah* principles with evidence-based inclusive strategies offers a transformative framework for nurturing the self-worth, faith, and identity of students with intellectual disabilities. This framework not only enriches Islamic educational practice but also expands the discourse on inclusive pedagogy within contemporary psychology and religious education.



Figure 1. Conceptual Model: Islamic Pedagogy, Self-Concept Formation, and Inclusive Educational Outcomes

The conceptual model above illustrates the interrelationship between Islamic Pedagogy, Self-Concept Formation, and Inclusive Educational Outcomes in the context of Islamic education for students with intellectual disabilities. The model integrates principles of *rahmah* (compassion), *tarbiyah ruhaniyah* (spiritual nurturing), and *tazkiyatun nafs* (self-purification) as the core of Islamic Pedagogy. These pedagogical values influence the development of students' positive self-concept, characterized by increased self-worth, emotional resilience, and spiritual awareness. In turn, a positive self-concept contributes to inclusive educational practices, manifested through learners' participation, autonomy, and moral engagement. The model demonstrates that compassionate, value-oriented pedagogy not only enhances psychological well-being but also fulfills the Islamic educational vision of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, education that uplifts every learner with dignity and mercy.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic pedagogical approaches grounded in compassion, personalization, and spiritual modeling play a crucial role in fostering a positive self-concept among students with intellectual disabilities. The findings demonstrate that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SLB Negeri Cerme Gresik serve not only as transmitters of religious knowledge but as *murabbi*, spiritual mentors who nurture students' emotional, moral, and spiritual growth. Through the pedagogy of compassion, teachers create emotionally safe and inclusive environments where students experience acceptance, respect, and unconditional positive regard. This directly enhances their self-worth and intrinsic motivation to learn. Personalized instruction and the habituation of simple religious acts, such as prayer, *dzikr*, and gratitude, help students build confidence, independence, and spiritual awareness. These practices are consistent with Rogers' humanistic theory of self-concept and the Islamic principles of *tarbiyah ruhaniyah* and *tazkiyatun nafs*, which emphasize purification of the soul and the realization of one's divine potential. The use of Islamic reinforcement and moral modeling strengthens both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, encouraging

students to see themselves as capable and dignified individuals created with purpose.

This study provides both practical and theoretical implications for the advancement of inclusive Islamic education. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of equipping Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers with inclusive pedagogical competencies that emphasize *rahmah* (compassion), empathy, and spiritual guidance. Teacher training institutions and *madrasah* should incorporate Islamic compassionate pedagogy into their curricula to strengthen educators' ability to address the emotional and spiritual needs of students with intellectual disabilities. School administrators are also encouraged to develop inclusive learning environments that integrate spiritual support, individualized instruction, and value-based reinforcement to promote student well-being and faith identity.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the integration of positive psychology and Islamic pedagogy, offering a framework for inclusive Islamic education that humanizes learners with special needs through spiritual empowerment. Practically, the study provides evidence that *rahmah-based* pedagogy can be effectively applied in special education to promote both psychological well-being and faith-based identity. This approach embodies the Islamic educational philosophy of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, affirming that every child, regardless of ability, deserves compassion, guidance, and the opportunity to achieve personal and spiritual growth. Future research is encouraged to expand this model across different educational contexts, including early childhood and higher Islamic education, to explore the broader implications of Islamic compassionate pedagogy in promoting inclusion and holistic human development.

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