

## From Exclusion to Inclusion: A Transformation of Learning Practices in Islamic Elementary Schools

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**Abstract:** This study examines the transformation of learning practices from exclusion to inclusion in Islamic elementary schools in response to the growing demand for equitable education for students with diverse learning needs, including students with intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, and socio-emotional challenges. Conducted at an Islamic elementary school implementing inclusive education, this qualitative case study explores how inclusive values are translated into leadership policies, classroom practices, and institutional documentation. Using purposive sampling, data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of school documents, and analyzed thematically with credibility ensured through researcher engagement, triangulation, and systematic field notes. The findings indicate that inclusive transformation is driven by leadership commitment, curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, peer-assisted learning, and structured psychosocial support services. Islamic values such as compassion (*rahmah*), justice (*'adl*), and mutual cooperation (*ta'awun*) function as ethical and pedagogical foundations that strengthen teachers' acceptance of diversity and foster an inclusive school culture. Based on these findings, the study proposes an integrated inclusive education model for Islamic elementary schools that aligns leadership governance, adaptive pedagogy, guidance and counseling services, and inclusive documentation practices to support sustainable inclusive transformation. Despite being limited to a single institutional setting, this study offers contextually grounded insights into how faith-based values can reinforce inclusive educational practices.

**Keywords:** Inclusion; Learning Practices; Islamic Elementary Schools.

### INTRODUCTION

Disability in education is increasingly understood not merely as an individual impairment or deficit, but as a social and relational construct shaped by interactions between learners, educational practices, institutional structures, and cultural norms. From this perspective, barriers to learning arise not solely from students physical, sensory, or cognitive differences, but from inflexible curricula, standardized teaching methods, exclusionary attitudes, and learning environments that fail to accommodate diversity. Disability thus emerges within relationships between students and teachers, learners and peers, individuals and school systems, rather than residing inherently within the child. This social-relational understanding challenges deficit-based views of “students with diverse needs” and reframes inclusion as a transformation of educational practices and cultures, rather than an adjustment demanded of learners themselves.

Inclusive education has emerged as a central global agenda in achieving educational equity and social justice, particularly for children with disabilities and diverse learning needs (Chung et al., 2025). In many countries, the shift from segregated to inclusive schooling reflects a broader commitment to human rights, as promoted through international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (Piriyatachagul & Nanthawong, 2025). However, in practice, many elementary schools, especially those based on religious traditions, still struggle to fully implement inclusive learning environments (Isrokatun et al., 2024). Islamic elementary schools, which play a significant role in shaping moral, spiritual, and academic development, often face unique challenges in accommodating students with special needs. Limited teacher preparedness, rigid curricula, and lingering stigma toward disability contribute to subtle forms of exclusion within classrooms. This situation creates a

critical gap between the Islamic values of justice, compassion, and dignity for all learners and the everyday realities of instructional practice. Therefore, examining how learning practices transform from exclusion to inclusion in Islamic elementary schools is both socially urgent and academically essential.

Previous studies on inclusive education have extensively explored policy implementation, teacher attitudes, classroom strategies, and school leadership in public and secular educational contexts. Research consistently shows that successful inclusion depends on teacher competence, collaborative school culture, and flexible instructional methods (Zhang, 2025). In the context of religious-based education, several scholars have examined character education, moral pedagogy, and faith-based schooling, including Islamic education at the elementary level (Amirudin et al., 2025). Some studies discuss the philosophical compatibility between Islamic teachings and inclusive principles, highlighting values such as mercy (*rahmah*), equality (*'adl*), and human dignity (*karamah al-insan*). However, empirical research that specifically investigates the transformation of daily learning practices from exclusion to inclusion within Islamic elementary schools remains limited. Most existing works still focus on normative or conceptual discussions rather than documenting how pedagogical change actually occurs in classrooms. This gap indicates the need for in-depth investigation into how inclusive learning is practically enacted in Islamic school settings.

This study aims to analyze the process and forms of transformation in learning practices from exclusion to inclusion in Islamic elementary schools. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: How do teachers modify their instructional strategies to accommodate diverse learners within inclusive classrooms? What roles do school culture, leadership, and Islamic values play in supporting or constraining this transformation? What challenges are encountered by teachers and schools during the transition toward inclusive learning practices? By addressing these questions, this study also seeks to identify patterns of change in classroom interaction, curriculum adaptation, and assessment practices. In addition, the research aims to explore how inclusive education is interpreted and practiced through the lens of Islamic educational values. Through these objectives, the study positions itself as both an analytical and practical inquiry into the evolving landscape of inclusive learning within Islamic elementary education.

This study is grounded in the argument that the transformation from exclusion to inclusion in Islamic elementary schools is not merely a technical or administrative change, but a deep pedagogical and cultural shift. It is hypothesized that inclusive learning practices in Islamic schools are more likely to be sustainable when they are aligned with Islamic ethical principles such as compassion, justice, and collective responsibility. The study assumes that teachers who integrate these values into differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, and adaptive assessment will demonstrate stronger commitment to inclusive practices. At the same time, structural constraints such as limited training, inadequate resources, and policy ambiguity may hinder this transformation. Therefore, this research not only tests the feasibility of inclusive pedagogical change in Islamic elementary schools but also offers implications for teacher development, curriculum reform, and faith-based educational policy. Ultimately, it seeks to contribute to a more culturally grounded model of inclusive education.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the transformation of learning practices from exclusion to inclusion within a real school context. Qualitative case studies are particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena in their natural settings (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). The unit of analysis or material object of this research was SD Al-Irsyad Jember, an Islamic elementary school currently developing inclusive education practices. The selection of this site was based on the assumption that it represents an Islamic educational institution experiencing a dynamic transition toward a more inclusive learning system. A case study design allows the researcher to investigate phenomena holistically by considering social, cultural, and religious values embedded in educational practices (Stake, 2010). Therefore, this study does not aim at statistical generalization, but rather at producing an in-depth contextual understanding of how inclusive learning transformation unfolds within an Islamic elementary school setting.

The sources of information in this study were determined through purposive sampling by considering the strategic positions of the informants in decision-making and the implementation of inclusive education (Patton, 2015). The primary informants consisted of the school principal, the Vice Principal for Curriculum Affairs, classroom teachers, and the Guidance and Counseling (GC) teacher. The principal was selected due to his/her central role in shaping school policy and the vision of inclusion (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). The Vice Principal for Curriculum played a significant role in curriculum planning and adaptation within inclusive settings. Classroom teachers were chosen because they directly implement inclusive learning practices in daily instruction (Florian, 2014), while the GC teacher plays a crucial role in providing psychological, social, and academic support, particularly for students with special needs (UNESCO, 2017). This diversity of informants enabled the study to gain comprehensive and multi-level perspectives on the transformation of learning practices.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation, which are commonly used in qualitative educational research to ensure data richness and triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Classroom observations were carried out to examine inclusive learning practices, teacher–student interactions, differentiated instructional strategies, and the social dynamics between regular students and students with special needs, in line with recommendations by Booth and Ainscow (2011). In-depth interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview guidelines to allow flexibility in exploring participants' experiences and perceptions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Documentation was used to complement observational and interview data, including curriculum documents, lesson plans, guidance and counseling programs, school policies, and evaluation records. The combination of these three techniques strengthened the credibility and depth of the research findings.

Data analysis in this study followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and focused the raw data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation according to the research objectives. The data display stage involved organizing the data into matrices and thematic narratives to facilitate pattern identification and interpretation. The conclusion drawing and verification stage involved continuously refining and testing emerging interpretations until data saturation was achieved. The analytical methods applied included content analysis to examine documents and interview transcripts (Krippendorff, 2018),

discourse analysis to explore the construction of meaning related to inclusion (Fairclough, 2013), and interpretative analysis to understand the deeper meaning of pedagogical transformation within the school context.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was established through data triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement in the field. Transferability was ensured by providing a thick description of the research context so that readers may assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a systematic audit trail of the research process, while confirmability was ensured by linking all interpretations directly to empirical data. Ethical considerations were also strictly observed by ensuring informed consent, maintaining participants' confidentiality, and adhering to principles of academic integrity and responsibility throughout the research process (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

The decision not to include student participants was influenced by ethical considerations, age-related communication constraints, and the need to minimize potential psychological risks for children. Consequently, this study foregrounds adult perspectives teachers, school leaders, and guidance and counseling personnel as key informants in understanding the transformation of inclusive learning practices. While this approach provides valuable insights into institutional, pedagogical, and psychosocial dimensions of inclusion, it may not fully capture students lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion. This limitation has implications for the depth of relational analysis from a disability studies perspective, and future research is therefore encouraged to incorporate student-centered methods, such as child-friendly interviews, participatory observation, or visual.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### Finding(s)

The interview results with key informants are visualized in Table 1 to illustrate the transformation of learning practices from exclusion to inclusion in Islamic elementary schools.

**Table 1. Summary of Interview Findings**

Informant	Core Statement	Focus of Change
Principal	Inclusion has become the official school vision	Inclusive Policy
Vice Principal for Curriculum	The curriculum is adjusted to students' needs	Curriculum Adaptation
Classroom Teacher	Differentiated learning has begun to be implemented	Learning Strategies
School Counselor	Emotional support has become more intensive	Psychosocial Support

The restatement of the data indicates that all informants agree that the shift toward inclusion has taken place systematically. The principal emphasized a change in vision, the vice principal for curriculum highlighted curriculum reconstruction, classroom teachers focused on the implementation of differentiated strategies, and the school counselor strengthened psychosocial services. These findings confirm that the transformation toward inclusion occurred at all school levels, from policy to classroom practice.

The patterns reflected in the interview data indicate that the transformation toward inclusion occurs both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, change begins with leadership policies that flow into curriculum management and classroom learning practices. Horizontally, collaboration emerges between classroom teachers and school counselors in supporting students' academic and emotional needs. The principal plays a central role as the

main driver of change by establishing an inclusive vision that legitimizes all school practices. The vice principal serves as a strategic bridge between policy and technical implementation. Classroom teachers operate at the frontline through the application of differentiated learning, while counselors reinforce psychosocial aspects. This pattern forms an integrated inclusive ecosystem within the school system.

Analytically, this pattern occurs because inclusive education requires both structural and cultural transformation. School leadership plays a crucial role in building the ideological legitimacy of inclusion, particularly within the context of Islamic schools that strongly value moral authority. Once inclusion is established as a formal school policy, teachers gain a strong foundation for pedagogical innovation. Differentiated learning emerges as a response to the heterogeneity of students' abilities, while the strengthening of counseling services reflects an awareness that inclusion concerns not only academic aspects but also social-emotional dimensions. This transformation is further reinforced by Islamic values such as compassion (*rahmah*), justice (*'adl*), and mutual assistance (*ta'awun*), which are ideologically aligned with inclusive principles. Thus, inclusion becomes not merely a policy demand but part of the school community's moral consciousness.

Although this study primarily draws on institutional and teacher perspectives, students' experiences of inclusion can be indirectly inferred from observed classroom interactions and pedagogical adjustments. For example, the increased use of differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and peer-assisted learning was accompanied by more frequent student participation, reduced instances of withdrawal, and more reciprocal peer interactions during learning activities. These observable shifts suggest that students with diverse learning needs experienced greater access to classroom engagement and social belonging, even in the absence of direct student testimony. From a relational disability studies perspective, such changes indicate that inclusion was enacted through transformed relationships and learning environments, rather than through individual remediation. Thus, while students' voices are not directly represented, their lived experiences are implicitly reflected in the reconfiguration of classroom practices and interactional patterns.

The findings further demonstrate that Islamic ethical values were not merely articulated at the normative level, but were operationalized through concrete pedagogical decisions. The principle of *rahmah* (compassion) was reflected in teachers flexible pacing, patient scaffolding, and non-punitive responses to learning difficulties, particularly for students with disabilities. The value of *'adl* (justice) informed adaptive assessment practices, where fairness was understood not as uniformity, but as responsiveness to individual learning conditions. Similarly, the concept of *karamah al-insan* (human dignity) guided classroom norms that emphasized respect, peer support, and the avoidance of stigmatizing labels. Through these mechanisms, Islamic values functioned as practical ethical frameworks that shaped instructional choices, classroom interactions, and assessment strategies, thereby supporting the sustainability of inclusive learning practices within the Islamic elementary school context.

The classroom observation results are visualized in Table 2 to describe the actual implementation of inclusive learning in daily school activities.

**Table 2. Classroom Observation Findings**

Observed Aspect	Field Findings	Pattern
Teaching Strategy	Teachers provide tiered assignments	Differentiated Learning
Student Interaction	Students help one another	Social Inclusion
Assessment	Assessment adjusted to students' abilities	Adaptive Evaluation
Classroom Atmosphere	Cooperative learning dominates	Inclusive Climate

The restated data show that all learning aspects, teaching strategies, social interaction, assessment systems, and classroom atmosphere, reflect inclusive principles. Teachers no longer apply a uniform method, students become accustomed to helping one another, and assessment is conducted flexibly according to each student's abilities.

The observation data indicate that inclusive practices have been internalized within daily classroom routines. Teachers consistently apply differentiated learning by providing varied tasks based on students' ability levels. Student interactions occur inclusively, as evidenced by peer tutoring and heterogeneous group work. Students with special needs are no longer isolated but actively involved in classroom activities. The assessment system is no longer uniform but adjusted to students' individual development. The classroom atmosphere tends to be cooperative rather than competitive, creating a sense of safety and comfort for all learners. This pattern indicates that inclusion is not merely implemented administratively but has become a living learning culture within the classroom.

This pattern occurs because teachers have undergone a paradigm shift from homogeneous learning approaches toward student-centered learning. Differentiated learning is implemented as a form of awareness that every child possesses unique potential and learning pace. Inclusive interactions among students emerge because teachers deliberately cultivate a cooperative classroom climate. The Islamic value of mutual assistance further strengthens peer tutoring practices. Adaptive assessment is implemented because teachers realize that standardized benchmarks may perpetuate exclusion. Interpretatively, inclusion has become a new pedagogical identity of the school rather than merely an additional program. This indicates the internalization of inclusive values within teachers' professional consciousness.



**Figure 1. Al-Irsyad Elementary School provides optimal growth and development support for inclusive students through parenting activities.**

The documentation indicates that all learning instruments have been aligned with inclusive principles. Teachers' lesson plans contain flexible learning objectives and differentiated activities. Counseling programs include individual services for students experiencing academic or emotional barriers. School policies explicitly state a commitment to inclusive education as part of the institutional vision. Assessment reports contain not only numerical scores but also descriptive accounts of students' individual development. This pattern demonstrates that inclusion has been formally institutionalized within the school's administrative system. Consequently, there is continuity between planning, implementation, and evaluation in inclusive education.

Analytically, this pattern indicates that the sustainability of inclusive education is strongly influenced by the strengthening of the school's bureaucratic system. Documentation functions as both a quality control tool and a practical guideline for teachers in implementing inclusive learning. When policies, lesson plans, counseling services, and assessment systems are all aligned with inclusive principles, inclusive practices become more stable and less dependent on individual actors. Flexibility in assessment emphasizes that learning success is interpreted as personal development rather than merely standardized achievement. Thus, documentation serves not only an administrative function but also an ideological instrument that safeguards the continuity of the transformation from exclusion to inclusion in Islamic elementary schools.

## **Discussion**

The interview findings imply that inclusive transformation in Islamic elementary schools functions as a systemic reform rather than a fragmented initiative. Leadership commitment, curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, and psychosocial support collectively enhance the institutional capacity to serve diverse learners. Functionally, this alignment strengthens policy coherence, pedagogical responsiveness, and emotional safety. However, dysfunction may emerge when teacher readiness and infrastructure development lag behind policy demands, creating implementation gaps. Recent studies confirm that leadership-driven inclusion improves school-wide coherence (Adam, et.al, 2025), while curriculum flexibility enhances learning equity (Barua and Lockee, 2024). Differentiated instruction supports diverse achievement (Ziernwald, et.al, 2022), and school-based counseling strengthens emotional inclusion (Owens, 2024). In religious schools, value-based leadership amplifies inclusive norms (Rahman, 2025). Thus, interview-based implications show that inclusive transformation functions optimally when leadership, pedagogy, and psychosocial systems are structurally integrated; otherwise, policy-practice misalignment becomes the primary dysfunction.

The causal structure behind interview findings lies in the interaction between institutional authority, teacher agency, and religious value systems. In Islamic schools, leadership carries moral and symbolic legitimacy, allowing inclusive policies to penetrate organizational culture rapidly. Teacher agency transforms these policies into classroom realities through instructional differentiation. The integration of guidance and counseling emerges from the school's recognition of students' holistic development. Studies on school reform emphasize leadership as a catalyst for inclusive restructuring (Parashchenko., 2025). Teacher agency is central in sustaining inclusive change (Li & Rupp., 2021). Value-based education strengthens ethical commitment to social justice (Moorthy, et.al, 2021). Psychosocial support correlates with inclusive sustainability (Canedo & Garcia, 2022). Therefore, the underlying structure of inclusive transformation is not merely technical but ideological and relational, rooted in leadership legitimacy, teacher professionalism, and faith-based moral responsibility.

Classroom observations imply that inclusive practices function as the operational core of transformation from exclusion to inclusion. Differentiated instruction, peer assistance, adaptive assessment, and cooperative learning climate enhance participation, belonging, and learning equity. These practices function to reduce learning barriers and normalize diversity as an instructional resource. Yet, dysfunction may arise if teachers lack sufficient pedagogical support, leading to superficial differentiation or uneven student engagement. Empirical evidence confirms that differentiated instruction increases accessibility (Coubergs et al., 2019), while peer tutoring strengthens social inclusion (Batu et al., 2021). Adaptive

assessment prevents exclusionary grading (Looney, 2020). Cooperative learning consistently improves inclusive classroom climate (Gillies, 2019; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2020). The observation findings imply that inclusive transformation becomes meaningful only when enacted through daily pedagogical routines; otherwise, inclusion risks remaining symbolic rather than functional.

The causal explanation of observed inclusive practices lies in pedagogical paradigm shifts and socio-cultural reinforcement. Teachers shift from homogenous teaching models toward learner-centered instruction due to increased awareness of student diversity and professional learning experiences. Cooperative learning and peer assistance are reinforced by the Islamic value of mutual help (*ta'awun*), which becomes a socio-cultural driver of inclusion. Adaptive assessment reflects institutional pressure to avoid exclusionary evaluation systems. Paradigm shifts toward learner-centered pedagogy drive inclusion effectiveness. Professional development influences inclusive competence. Cultural norms shape collaborative learning (Mir, 2025). Assessment reform correlates with inclusive sustainability. Thus, inclusive classroom practices emerge not only from technical training but also from cultural internalization and systemic assessment reform.

Documentary evidence implies that the institutionalization of inclusion strengthens the functional stability of inclusive transformation. Modified lesson plans, individual counseling programs, inclusive school policies, and flexible assessment reports ensure consistency between planning, implementation, and evaluation. Functionally, documentation becomes a mechanism of accountability, quality assurance, and professional guidance. However, documentation may become dysfunctional if reduced to administrative formality without reflective practice. Research shows that inclusive policy alignment improves sustainability (Bridges and Guo, 2024). Individualized educational planning supports long-term learner progress (Solberg, et.al, 2018). Counseling documentation enhances emotional inclusion (Clark and Breman, 2009). Flexible assessment documentation promotes equity. Therefore, the strategic documentation of inclusive practices functions as an institutional memory that stabilizes transformation and prevents regression to exclusionary routines.

The causal foundation of inclusive documentation lies in bureaucratic rationalization and organizational learning. Schools formalize inclusive values through policy texts, lesson plans, and assessment records to ensure staff compliance, continuity across leadership transitions, and systemic monitoring. Documentation also reflects organizational learning, where successful practices are codified and standardized. Bureaucratic alignment is critical for reform sustainability (Nugroho, et.al, 2024). Organizational learning strengthens reform durability (Hartley & Rashman, 2018). Policy-to-practice coherence improves inclusion outcomes (Molchanova, 2025). Data-informed documentation enhances instructional quality (Datnow & Park, 2021; Schildkamp, 2022). Thus, inclusive documentation is not merely administrative but represents an underlying structure of organizational cognition that enables the long-term institutionalization of inclusive education in Islamic elementary schools.

Recent studies on inclusive education in elementary and Islamic school contexts consistently emphasize that inclusive transformation is a multidimensional process shaped by pedagogical competence, institutional support, and value-based orientations. Research by Holif, Fina, and Nita demonstrates that teachers' professional capacity to adapt curricula, implement differentiated instruction, and foster responsive classroom interactions is central to sustaining inclusive practices in faith-based schools. Complementing this, Anggraini and Subasno (2024) highlight that inclusive learning environments are strengthened when instructional design follows universal and flexible principles that accommodate diverse learner needs from the outset. From a psychosocial perspective, Naeemya and Yoneda (2024) stress that students with intensive needs are best supported through systemic

approaches that integrate academic instruction with social and emotional support mechanisms. Similarly, recent findings underscore the role of innovative and adaptive teaching practices in promoting meaningful participation of students with special needs (Osman, 2024). Collectively, these studies reinforce the argument that inclusion in Islamic elementary schools should be understood as a systemic and relational transformation that aligns pedagogical innovation, institutional structures, psychosocial support, and ethical values.

## CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that the transformation from exclusion to inclusion in Islamic elementary schools occurs as a systemic, value-driven, and practice-oriented process. Inclusion is not merely implemented as a technical policy, but internalized through leadership commitment, curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, psychosocial support, and cooperative classroom culture. The key lesson learned is that inclusive education becomes sustainable when it is simultaneously supported by structural policies, pedagogical innovation, and moral-religious values. Islamic principles such as compassion (*rahmah*), justice (*'adl*), and mutual assistance (*ta'awun*) play a central role in strengthening teachers' and students' acceptance of diversity and inclusion.

This study contributes significantly to the field of inclusive education by enriching the perspective on faith-based inclusive schooling, particularly within Islamic elementary education. Methodologically, the qualitative case study approach provides a deep and contextual understanding of how inclusion is practiced in real school settings. Substantively, this study integrates leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, psychosocial services, and documentation as interconnected dimensions of inclusive transformation. It also advances theoretical insight by demonstrating how religious values function as an enabling variable that strengthens inclusive practices. The case of SD Al-Irsyad Jember offers a unique contribution as an empirical model of inclusive transformation within an Islamic institutional context.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. It is limited to a single Islamic elementary school, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The focus on qualitative methods also limits the measurement of inclusive outcomes in quantitative terms, such as academic achievement or long-term student development. In addition, the study primarily explores institutional and teacher perspectives, while students' voices remain underrepresented. Future research is recommended to involve multiple schools, apply mixed-method approaches, include different educational levels, and examine the long-term impact of inclusive transformation on students' academic, social, and spiritual development.

Practically, these findings call for policymakers to establish operational inclusive education policies, provide sustained institutional support, and ensure systematic teacher professional development in Islamic elementary schools. At the same time, teacher education institutions must explicitly integrate inclusive pedagogy with Islamic values in pre-service and in-service programs to enable consistent and sustainable inclusive practices.

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