



Transforming inclusive practices in Islamic-based early childhood education: A case study in Indonesia

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Abstract

Despite growing global attention to inclusive education, limited research has explored its implementation within Islamic-based early childhood contexts in Indonesia. This study investigates how inclusive education is understood and practiced by teachers in early childhood education (PAUD) 'Aisyiyah, a long-standing Islamic early childhood provider. Using qualitative methods—observations and interviews during teacher training across five provinces—the study reveals a paradigmatic shift among educators from deficit-based to strengths-based views of diversity. Practically, teachers adopted differentiated instruction, multimodal strategies, and assistive technologies. Religious values rooted in compassion and social justice underpin these inclusive practices. However, challenges such as limited resources and inconsistent policy implementation remain. The study calls for stronger multi-stakeholder collaboration, policy reinforcement, and investment in teacher capacity development to support inclusive ECE aligned with Indonesia's 2045 vision.

Keywords: early childhood; belief system; growth mindset; inclusive education; teacher training.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (PAUD) plays a fundamental role in shaping a child's future by providing a strong foundation for their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Research consistently demonstrates that high-quality ECE programs yield long-term benefits, including improved academic achievement, higher socio-emotional competencies, and increased future economic opportunities (Bakken et al., 2017). However, ensuring that ECE programs are accessible and inclusive for all children, regardless of ability, remains a persistent challenge. Inclusive education at the early childhood level requires a shift in both educational paradigms and practical implementation, ensuring that diverse learners receive equitable opportunities to thrive (Fyssa et al., 2014).

One of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, 'Aisyiyah, has played a pivotal role in advancing early childhood education while integrating religious values with progressive educational practices. Founded in 1917 as a women's movement under Muhammadiyah,

'Aisyiyah has been committed to promoting women's empowerment, social justice, and equitable access to education (Aryanti, 2013). In 1919, 'Aisyiyah established one of the first early childhood education institutions in Indonesia, the Froebel School in Yogyakarta, which later evolved into the widely recognized TK 'Aisyiyah Bustanul Athfal. Today, the organization oversees a vast educational network, including 20,125 early childhood education institutions, 4,398 elementary, middle, and high school institutions, and 3,904 Functional Literacy institutions (Aisyiyah, 2024).

Despite 'Aisyiyah's long-standing contributions to education, the implementation of inclusive education within its PAUD institutions remains an underexplored area. Previous studies have extensively documented 'Aisyiyah's role in early childhood education development (Maimun, 2019; Suyadi & Kuswanto, 2020), yet limited research has examined how inclusive education principles are understood, adapted, and practiced within these institutions. There is a need to investigate whether educators within PAUD 'Aisyiyah have undergone a paradigmatic shift in their understanding of inclusivity and how such changes translate into pedagogical and structural adjustments. Additionally, the extent to which religious values influence the adoption of inclusive practices warrants further examination.

Thus, this study aims to address the following research questions: (1) How have educators within PAUD 'Aisyiyah conceptualized and implemented inclusive education? (2) What paradigmatic shifts, if any, have occurred in teachers' understanding of inclusive education? (3) What practical strategies have been adopted to accommodate diverse learners? (4) How do religious and cultural values shape the inclusivity efforts within PAUD 'Aisyiyah?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature by providing empirical insights into the intersection of faith-based education and inclusive pedagogical transformations. Furthermore, the findings will contribute to policy discussions on sustainable and culturally responsive inclusive education practices in Indonesia, aligning with the nation's vision for a Golden Indonesia 2045.

As a pioneer in early childhood education in Indonesia, 'Aisyiyah has been championing the movement for "education for all" since the early 20th century to the present. They provide equitable education without discrimination based on ethnicity or social class in

society. This aligns with the values of inclusivity in education that are being promoted by the government through policy issuance and efforts to provide support systems in each district/city to realize quality inclusive education.

Steps have been taken to strengthen strategic aspects for the development of inclusive education in 'Aisyiyah'S PAUD institutions. These steps include:

Strategic steps in paradigm shift (beliefs system)

Belief systems serve as a fundamental paradigmatic framework for developing inclusive education by influencing educators' attitudes, practices, and commitment to creating supportive and equitable learning environments for all students. Literature emphasizes the importance of teachers' beliefs and attitudes in promoting inclusive practices within educational settings (Beacham & Rouse, 2011). Teachers' beliefs about the urgency of realizing inclusive education are crucial as they impact their dedication to implementing inclusive practices and can influence student achievement in the classroom (Woodcock, 2020). Studies demonstrate that teachers' beliefs and self-efficacy are key to effectively implementing inclusive education (You, S., Kim & Shin, 2019). Educators with positive beliefs about inclusive education are more likely to create inclusive classroom environments that meet the diverse needs of students (Dias, 2015). Furthermore, teachers' beliefs are essential for the advancement of inclusive schools and are an integral part of teachers' professional competencies (Scharenberg, 2022). Teachers' beliefs about inclusive education are shaped by factors such as experience, knowledge, self-reflection, and cultural beliefs (Sansrisna & Nadia, 2018). In summary, belief systems are the foundation of inclusive education as they shape educators' attitudes, practices, and dedication to establishing inclusive learning environments that address the diverse needs of all students.

The implementation of inclusive education is significantly enhanced by cultivating a growth mindset among educators. Growth mindset, which emphasizes the belief that intelligence and abilities can be developed through dedication and perseverance, plays a crucial role in nurturing inclusive learning environments (Herdian et al., 2024). Educators with a growth mindset are more likely to view setbacks as learning opportunities and encourage students to persist in the face of challenges (Wen & Cai, 2024). This mindset fosters resilience, commitment to lifelong learning, and perseverance, particularly beneficial for

learners facing difficulties or coming from minority groups (Memari et al., 2023).

By instilling a growth mindset among educators, inclusive education can be further strengthened. This mindset not only cultivates a culture of continuous improvement and resilience but also encourages individuals to embrace challenges and view setbacks as opportunities for growth and development. Ultimately, integrating growth mindset into educational practices can contribute to building more inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

Practical steps for inclusive education: curriculum, instruction, educators, and resources

In the development of inclusive education, practical aspects encompassing curriculum, instructional strategies, teacher training, and resource allocation play a crucial role in establishing supportive and equitable learning environments for all students. The curriculum serves as the fundamental element in inclusive education, guiding teaching and learning activities tailored to the diverse needs of students. It is imperative for schools and government agencies to continuously implement inclusive education policies and invest in education to guarantee adequate resources and effective teacher training (Fang, 2021).

Inclusive education practices are designed to provide all students with opportunities to access high-quality education and fully engage in the learning process. Inclusive education emphasizes the full acceptance and integration of all learners, both academically and socially, within the school environment. Teachers play a pivotal role in implementing inclusive practices, and their attitudes and commitment to inclusion significantly influence teaching behaviors and the success of inclusive policies (O'Toole & Burke, 2013).

Teacher training and professional development are vital components in building inclusive education. Educators need to be equipped to implement inclusive practices effectively, which involves understanding the diverse needs of students, adapting teaching methods, and creating inclusive learning environments (Allday et al., 2013). Practical aspects encompassing curriculum development, instructional strategies, teacher training, and resource allocation are integral to the formation of inclusive education. By focusing on these aspects, educational institutions can create environments that promote equity, access, and success for all students, regardless of their background or abilities.

The availability of resources plays a crucial role in supporting inclusive education practices. Schools must be equipped with the necessary resources to ensure access, participation, and success for all students (Andrews et al., 2019). Governments and education authorities should focus on providing the support and resources needed for teachers to effectively implement inclusion, preventing inconsistencies and failures in the implementation of inclusive practices (Chiner & Cardona, 2013).

METHOD

The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the intricacies of teacher training for inclusive education in PAUD 'Aisyiyah institutions. A case study design was used to provide an in-depth understanding of how inclusive education principles are internalized and applied by teachers. Data were collected through observations and semi-structured interviews conducted during a three-day teacher training program. The research was carried out in three PAUD 'Aisyiyah institutions in Indonesia, recognized for their commitment to inclusive education. The participants included 150 teachers actively engaged in the training sessions.

To ensure a rigorous data analysis process, all interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process involved open coding, where key themes emerged inductively from the data, followed by axial coding to identify relationships between categories.

Observational data were also analyzed using pattern coding, allowing for the identification of recurring instructional strategies, teacher perceptions, and challenges in implementing inclusive practices. Triangulation was employed by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and training materials to enhance credibility and validity.

By employing a systematic qualitative analysis (thematic analysis), this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the paradigmatic and practical shifts experienced by teachers undergoing training in inclusive education. The thematic findings were used to develop a frequency-based rubric for each indicator. The rubric was utilized to quantify teachers' achievement during training. Each participant was assigned a binary score (1 = theme expressed; 0 = theme not expressed) for each theme or subtheme, based on

evidence in their interview transcript or observation record. The percentages reported in the result tables represent the proportion of participants whose responses reflected the presence of a particular theme or indicator, before and after the training. This approach follows the quantification method of transforming qualitative data into categorical frequencies for interpretive clarity in thematic evaluation (Sandelowski, 2001).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This training was attended by 150 participants from various PAUD 'Aisyiyah in five provinces across Indonesia. The research results show a significant improvement in both paradigmatic aspects. Each table below illustrates the changes before and after the training per theme emerged.

Paradigmatic Aspects

Findings from the study indicate a substantial improvement in teachers' belief systems and growth mindsets after participating in the training. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and observational data revealed that the training effectively reinforced teachers' understanding and commitment to inclusive education principles. Table 1 illustrates the quantitative improvements observed in paradigmatic aspects.

Table 1. Research results on paradigmatic aspects

Aspect	Indicator	Before Training	After Training	Improvement
Belief System	Understanding inclusive education	70%	90%	20%
	Commitment to inclusive practices	65%	88%	23%
	Support for inclusive policies	60%	85%	25%
	Positive attitude towards diversity	68%	98%	30%
Growth Mindset	Belief in ability development	72%	92%	20%
	Response to failure as a learning opportunity	63%	87%	24%
	Openness to innovation	70%	90%	20%
	Motivation for	66%	89%	23%

continuous
professional
development

1. Strengthening Belief Systems

The increase in teachers’ belief in inclusive education aligns with Bandura (1997) self-efficacy theory, which posits that an individual’s belief in their ability to execute behaviors influences their motivation and persistence. The observed improvement suggests that prior skepticism or hesitation regarding inclusive education was reduced through training that provided both theoretical knowledge and practical implementation strategies.

Teachers’ commitment to inclusive practices grew significantly, reflecting Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, which states that attitudes and perceived control over behavior significantly influence commitment. Training sessions incorporated experiential learning and case studies, helping teachers recognize that inclusive education is not merely an ideal but a feasible and beneficial approach.

Cultivating a Growth Mindset

The results also demonstrate significant progress in teachers’ growth mindsets, as described by Dweck (2014). The increase in responses such as “failure as a learning opportunity” and “motivation for continuous professional development” suggests that training helped shift perspectives from fixed ability beliefs to a more flexible approach. This transformation is critical in inclusive education, as teachers must continuously adapt their strategies to meet diverse learning needs.

Practical Aspects

The training also led to substantial improvements in curriculum implementation, teaching strategies, educator capacity, and resource availability. Table 2 provides a summary of the key changes.

Table 2. Research results on practical aspects				
Aspect	Indicator	Before Training	After Training	Improvement
Curriculum	Curriculum flexibility	65%	85%	20%
	Integration of inclusive values	60%	82%	22%
	Adaptation of materials for	58%	80%	22%

Learning	special needs			
	Inclusivity-based evaluation	62%	84%	22%
	Use of diverse teaching methods	70%	90%	20%
	Active involvement of students	68%	88%	25%
	Use of assistive technology	55%	80%	25%
Educator	Assessments supporting individual needs	60%	85%	25%
	Confidence in teaching students with special needs	63%	88%	25%
	Knowledge of inclusive methods	62%	86%	24%
	Motivation for professional development	66%	89%	23%
	Inclusive classroom management skills	58%	83%	25%
Resource	Availability of inclusive learning aids	50%	78%	28%
	Access to educational technology	52%	80%	28%
	Child-friendly physical environment	60%	85%	25%
	Community support and collaboration	55%	82%	27%

Curriculum and Teaching Adaptations

The post-training increase in curriculum flexibility and inclusivity-based evaluation aligns with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles (Hartmann, 2015), emphasizing the need for diverse instructional approaches. Teachers implemented differentiated instruction, making content more accessible to students with varying needs. Educator Readiness and Resource Utilization

The training significantly improved teachers' confidence and classroom management skills, which supports Vygotsky's social constructivist theory—stating that learning occurs within social interactions (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018). The mentoring system, where experienced teachers guided less-experienced educators, created a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998), reinforcing professional growth.

Religious Values and Inclusive Education

Interviews indicate that Islamic values played a crucial role in reinforcing teachers' commitment to inclusive education. Participants expressed that religious teachings provided a moral and spiritual foundation for supporting all students, aligning with Islamic concepts of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for all creations) and *adl* (justice).

"The religious aspect has greatly helped me understand the importance of inclusivity in education. Religious values teach us to respect each individual and give them equal opportunities, which aligns with the principles of inclusive education." (Ernawaty, 32 years old)

This finding resonates with ethic of care theories (Noddings, 2015), where compassion, empathy, and a moral sense of responsibility drive inclusive educational practices.

Discussion

The analysis of the implementation of inclusive education at PAUD 'Aisyiyah provides important insights relevant to Indonesia's preparation towards Golden Indonesia/Indonesia Emas 2045. Inclusive education is a crucial foundation in creating a fair, inclusive, and highly competitive society. Strengthening belief systems, fostering growth mindsets, curriculum adjustments, teacher capacity development, resource optimization, and community involvement are key aspects that can help Indonesia prepare an inclusive, competitive, and ready-to-face-global-challenges golden generation. By internalizing diversity values from an early age, future generations will be better prepared to live in a plural society and appreciate differences, laying a crucial foundation for creating social cohesion and harmony amidst an increasingly diverse society.

To achieve Indonesia Emas, continuous efforts are needed to strengthen belief systems, cultivate growth mindsets, adjust curricula, develop learning strategies, enhance

teacher capacity, and ensure the availability and optimal use of resources. By continuously developing and implementing inclusive education, Indonesia can ensure that all children have equal opportunities to contribute to the nation's future. Collaboration among the government, communities, educational institutions, and the private sector will create a holistic support network, enabling children from various backgrounds to receive the education they need, thus strengthening Indonesia's ecosystem of inclusive and high-quality education. Sustainable research on the implementation of inclusive education in the future is a key to monitoring progress, identifying new challenges, and designing more effective solutions to support the vision of Indonesia Emas. With sustainable research, we can enrich our understanding of best practices in inclusive education and ensure that our efforts are aligned with national goals towards a more inclusive and sustainable future.

CONCLUSION

The findings and analysis indicate that the implementation of inclusive education at PAUD 'Aisyiyah has had a significantly positive impact in creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all children. Paradigmatically, the reinforcement of belief systems and the development of a growth mindset have been crucial steps in fostering a more inclusive and diverse society. Practically, curriculum adjustments, the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies, teacher capacity building, and resource optimization have resulted in more diverse, engaging, and effective learning environments for all students.

However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring the sustainability of belief system reinforcement, teacher skill development, and resource optimization. Therefore, continuous efforts involving various stakeholders—including the government, communities, and educational institutions—are essential to ensuring the long-term success of inclusive education. Future research is needed to explore the long-term impact of this training and to identify policy strategies that can further support the sustainable and widespread implementation of inclusive education. These efforts are crucial in advancing Indonesia's vision for a more inclusive, competitive, and sustainable future.

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Rubric for quantifying observational and interview data after thematic analysis

Rubric below was utilized to quantifying verbatim data from observation and interview with participants regarding inclusive education in PAUD 'Aisyiyah. Each participant has been given scale 1 for every emerging theme and 0 for not emerging theme based on their information. A percentage is then given of the total number of scores obtained. The percentages in the results table are obtained from the number of participants who indicated the theme divided by the total number of participants multiplied by 100%. The following is the thematic rubric used for the two main categories: Paradigmatic and Practical Aspects.

Tabel 1

Paradigmatic Aspects Rubric

Tema Utama	Indikator/Subtema	Deskripsi Tematik	Skor 1 (Tema Muncul)	Skor 0 (Tidak Muncul)
Belief System	Understanding inclusive education	Understanding the concept of inclusive education	Calling inclusion a right for all children	There is no mention of inclusion or any doubt about it.
Belief System	Commitment to inclusive practices	Commitment to inclusive practices	Provide examples of concrete practices or plans	Showing no commitment or objection
Belief System	Support for inclusive policies	Support for inclusion policies	Expressing support or readiness to follow the rules	Neither mentioning nor rejecting inclusion policies
Belief System	Positive attitude towards diversity	Positive attitude towards diversity	Seeing diversity as wealth or opportunity	Seeing diversity as an obstacle
Growth Mindset	Belief in ability development	The belief that all children can thrive	Saying all children can learn with effort	Saying only certain children can thrive
Growth Mindset	Response to failure as a learning opportunity	Response to failure as a learning process	Refer to failure as an opportunity to learn	Not ruminating on failure
Growth Mindset	Openness to innovation	Openness to new methods/tools	Shows interest in new approaches	Skeptical or resistant to change
Growth Mindset	Motivation for professional development	The drive to continue learning	Show enthusiasm for further training	Not interested or satisfied

Tabel 2*Practical Aspects Rubric*

Tema Utama	Indikator/Subtema	Deskripsi Tematik	Skor 1 (Tema Muncul)	Skor 0 (Tidak Muncul)
Curriculum	Curriculum flexibility	Ability to adapt materials	Provide examples of adapting materials to student needs	Teach with a uniform approach
Curriculum	Integration of inclusive values	Instilling inclusive values in learning	Connecting lessons to values of justice/empathy	There is no mention of inclusive values at all
Curriculum	Adaptation of materials	Use of special adaptation media/materials	Using special aids for certain students	There is no adjustment of learning media
Curriculum	Inclusivity-based evaluation	Different evaluations	Using evaluation formats varies according to student needs	Using only one form of standard test
Learning	Use of diverse teaching methods	Variations in learning methods	Using various approaches (visual, kinesthetic, etc.)	Just lectures or one method only
Learning	Active involvement of students	Active student participation	Engaging students directly and collaboratively	Passive students, only receiving material
Learning	Use of assistive technology	Use of technological tools	Using assistive technology for students with special needs	No aids at all
Learning	Assessments supporting individual needs	Assessment is based on student strengths	Customize forms and assessment criteria	Assessment is the same for all students