



Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Instilling Empathy in Vocational High School Students

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Abstract

This study discusses the revitalization of the role of teachers in Islamic Education learning amidst rapid technological developments. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers are faced with the challenge of adapting their traditional role as information transmitters to become facilitators and innovators of technology-based learning, without abandoning Islamic values. The purpose of this study is to formulate concrete strategies to strengthen the role of teachers so that PAI learning is more effective and contextual in the digital era. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach through a literature review of scientific literature, educational policies, and related digital sources, with a study period spanning from 2015 to 2025. The results of the study indicate that there has been a shift in the role of PAI teachers from material transmitters to innovative learning facilitators, although technology integration is still limited to media adaptation without in-depth reinforcement of Islamic values. The main obstacles include low teacher digital literacy, limited infrastructure, and a learning paradigm that is still teacher-centered. The proposed revitalization strategy includes TPACK-based training, the development of a sharia-compliant LMS, the establishment of a digital PAI teacher professional learning community, and the implementation of blended-flipped Islamic values-based learning. Multi-stakeholder collaboration and affirmative government policies are needed to realize effective, contextual, and relevant Islamic Religious Education learning in the digital age.

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INTRODUCTION

In the modern era and the increasingly advanced flow of globalization, many problems have emerged, giving rise to social disparities both within society and in the learning environment. Among these problems is a lack of empathy. Empathy can be a guideline for human life, as it is defined as an effort to understand the thoughts and feelings of others ([Kamaruddin et al., 2023](#)). Therefore, balancing social concern and caring for others is crucial for daily activities. Empathy does not come instantly; it requires ongoing teaching and practice. Empathy is crucial for students and adolescents. This is because it is a key

ingredient in creating healthy relationships, which begin with a sense of concern for the social environment around them (Afifah et al., 2024). Students who possess empathy are those who can understand the feelings, situations, desires, and needs of others. Ideal relationships are expected to provide comfort for students during the classroom learning process (Anggraini & Hutasuhut, 2022).

Social awareness cannot be measured solely based on social knowledge, as it does not solely depend on a child's mastery of existing material and knowledge (Ningsi & Suzima, 2021). What is more important is how deeply ingrained that awareness is within a person's soul and its influence on their daily behavior. Instilling social awareness in everyday life is reflected in acts of mutual assistance. Individuals who demonstrate genuine concern will undoubtedly receive recognition, while those who lack it tend to be isolated from their surroundings (Kardinus, 2022). Therefore, it is important to recognize that in this increasingly advanced and sophisticated era, many young people are vulnerable to various factors, particularly the negative impacts of globalization and technology.

The role of teachers in shaping students' positive character is crucial. A teacher is not merely an instructor but also a role model and example for students (Hartati, 2023). The success of character education is largely determined by the teacher's role in the learning process. Therefore, a teacher significantly influences shaping students' character (Yestiani & Zahwa, 2020). In education, teachers play a crucial role as instructors and mentors for students. They impart knowledge and contribute to shaping students' attitudes, behaviors, and mindsets. As role models, teachers serve as role models for students to follow, thus significantly influencing the learning process (Judrah et al., 2024).

As educators, Islamic religious education teachers are responsible for teaching religious knowledge, playing a crucial role in character formation, and instilling a deep understanding of spiritual values in everyday life. One of the core values of Islamic teachings is empathy, reflected in mutual respect, caring for others, and helping those in need (Munawir et al., 2022). By providing students with concrete and insightful examples of how to treat others with compassion and understanding, they are empowered to learn.

The problem in the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in instilling empathy in students of Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School is the low level of awareness and lack of understanding of students about the importance of empathy in everyday life, because during the learning process that takes place in class, students pay less attention to the teacher who is explaining (*Observation in SMK Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa*, 2025). Therefore, the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers is the focus of this research because it aims to increase awareness of the importance of empathy for fellow human beings. The role of Islamic Religious Education teachers is essential for students to understand better and pay attention to the importance of empathy in everyday life.

The lack of understanding about empathy is due to students' inattention and difficulty understanding the lessons being taught. Empathy is often discussed in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lessons, although the term "empathy" is not explicitly used. However, the

values underlying empathy, such as mutual understanding, respect for others' feelings, and helping others, are always taught within Islamic teachings about compassion, mutual assistance, and maintaining good relationships. Therefore, sometimes some students still do not understand or cannot practice empathy towards others.

Several other studies also reinforce the urgency of instilling empathy in the context of Islamic education, although they still leave room for further research at different levels and approaches. For example, Rahmadayani and colleagues (2022) conducted research at SMP Negeri 4 Jambi City on the internalization of Islamic educational values through the instillation of worship habits and religious motivation by Islamic Religious Education teachers. Strategies such as congregational prayer, providing advice, and fostering religious behavior were implemented to strengthen students' character. While the results showed an increase in religiosity, this study did not explicitly address the instillation of empathy as a crucial component of students' socio-emotional intelligence, particularly in their interactions with peers and the broader school environment ([Rahmadayani et al., 2022](#)).

Meanwhile, Septiana (2016) examined the effectiveness of empathy accuracy training for nursing vocational school students using an experiential learning approach. The training was shown to improve students' empathic abilities through social simulation activities and reflection on experiences. However, the focus of this study was not on the regular context of Islamic Religious Education learning, but rather on special training that was separate from the curriculum structure and did not directly involve Islamic Religious Education teachers as the primary facilitators in the process of internalizing empathy values in the classroom ([Septiana, 2016](#)).

Another study by Hasbua (2025) examined the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in shaping students' emotional intelligence at SMA Negeri 7 Pinrang, including aspects of empathy and self-control. Teachers play a role in developing teaching materials and learning methods that foster emotional awareness and healthy social interactions. However, this study was conducted at the high school level. It did not address the unique dynamics of vocational high school students, who tend to be more heterogeneous, face vocational pressures, and face more complex social challenges in the context of adolescence and the transition to the workforce ([Hasbua, 2025](#)).

Thus, this research occupies a relatively unexplored area: the instillation of empathy through the direct role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in vocational high school learning, using an integrative and contextual pedagogical approach. This focus is crucial considering that empathy is a key pillar in shaping the social awareness of vocational high school students living in the digital era, fraught with challenges in interpersonal communication and a decline in sensitivity to surrounding social conditions. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers serve as material transmitters and role models, facilitators of values, and agents of empathy formation within real and ongoing classroom dynamics.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in instilling empathy in students of Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School, with an emphasis on the forms of roles carried out by teachers, pedagogical strategies used in the learning process, and the dynamics of teacher-student interactions that support the formation of empathy as part of character values. With this focus, this study not only explains what teachers do, but also how and why efforts to instill empathy are carried out as part of the mission of character education in Islamic Religious Education

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative field approach (*field research*), which allows researchers to understand social phenomena in depth through direct interaction with subjects in the field (Sugiyono, 2013). The research focuses on social and educational issues occurring at Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School, with the subjects consisting of students, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, and Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers. This approach is relevant for uncovering the meanings, values, and practices that occur in a natural social context (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The data collection techniques used included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The instruments used in this study were observation guidelines, semi-structured interview guidelines, and a documentation format designed to systematically and contextually gather information. These three techniques were used simultaneously to obtain rich, in-depth, and authentic data, in keeping with the characteristics of qualitative research (Miles et al., 2018).

To ensure data validity, researchers applied technical triangulation and source triangulation. Technical triangulation was conducted by combining data from observations, interviews, and documentation, while source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from various informants. This strategy aims to increase the reliability and validity of the collected data and provide a comprehensive picture of the object of study (Patton Quinn, 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultivating empathy in education is a moral necessity and a strategy for building an inclusive, harmonious, and meaningful learning environment. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers have a strategic responsibility in shaping students' character, particularly in internalizing the values of empathy as part of the noble morals taught in Islam. This study reveals the role of PAI teachers in instilling empathy through motivational approaches, social facilitation, and social role models based on interviews, observations, and documentation.

Islamic Education Teachers as Emotional Motivators

Based on interviews with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Tri Bhakri At-Taqwa Vocational School, the teacher's role as a motivator is to awaken students' enthusiasm and curiosity about religious teachings and to demonstrate that religion is not merely a formality but also a relevant guideline for their lives. As a teacher, she also serves as a source of encouragement when students face difficulties in religious studies and their personal lives.

Based on interviews with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School, the role of teachers as motivators extends beyond encouraging to learn and touches on students' emotional dimensions. Teachers strive to instill the values of compassion, mutual respect, and caring for others in Islamic teachings. Teachers often incorporate exemplary stories from the Prophet and his companions in the learning process to foster students' empathy for the social conditions around them. One teacher stated:

"I don't just want to teach, I want them to become caring people, who are able to look at their friends who are sitting glumly in the corner of the classroom. If possible, they will become individuals who are not only intelligent but also sensitive to others" (Ichwan Zamzuri, [personal communication, January 19, 2025](#)).



Figure 1. Interview with Islamic Education teacher

Interviews with students showed that teachers who provide personal attention and moral support when students face personal challenges, such as family pressures or peer conflict, significantly impact students' understanding of empathy. One student stated:

"When our teachers asked how we were and listened to our concerns, it made us feel valued. I learned to be more sensitive to friends who were having difficulties. Even when I was quiet in class because of problems at home, my teacher was the first to approach me, ask me questions, and then encourage me.

That was very memorable" ([Adelia Putri, personal communication, February 19, 2025](#))

Observations show that Islamic Religious Education teachers consistently create a supportive classroom climate. They employ strategies such as collaborative reflection, appreciation for mutual assistance, and collaborative assignments that require students to interact with each other and understand their peers' perspectives. In this way, empathy is instilled conceptually and through everyday classroom practice.

As a motivator, a teacher's job is to teach, guide, encourage, and support students in learning ([Abdullah & Fahmi, 2022](#)). By instilling the right approach, a teacher can inspire and strengthen students to overcome challenges, achieve goals, and reach their full potential. The motivation provided by a teacher can encourage students to be more confident, more enthusiastic about learning, and more prepared to face any obstacles that arise ([Faishol et al., 2021](#)).

Based on the description above, it can be understood that Islamic Religious Education teachers consistently create a supportive classroom climate. They employ strategies such as collaborative reflection, appreciation for mutual assistance, and collaborative assignments that require students to interact with one another and understand their peers' perspectives. In this way, empathy is instilled conceptually and through everyday classroom practice.

Islamic Education Teachers as Social Facilitators

The role of Islamic Religious Education teachers extends beyond teaching to social facilitators, fostering healthy interactions between students, and fostering a social climate that fosters empathy. Interviews with guidance counselors and documentation of school activities reveal that Islamic Religious Education teachers actively facilitate open discussions, initiate social activities such as community service and visits to orphanages, and mediate tensions between student groups. The guidance counselor stated:

"Our Islamic Religious Education teachers often step in directly when there are minor conflicts, even when they are not teaching. They are a place for students to confide because they are considered neutral and understanding. Students often feel more comfortable sharing their problems with Islamic Religious Education teachers, especially if the problems are related to friendships and feelings" ([Najwa, personal communication, February 19, 2025](#)).

Researchers noted that teachers consciously created learning moments rich in social values, such as providing opportunities for students to express their opinions, showing mutual appreciation in class, and engaging in collaborative religious activities involving students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This demonstrates that Islamic Religious Education teachers teach cognitively and manage students' social dynamics to ensure harmony and inclusiveness.

A social facilitator can foster educational social interactions among students and guide these interactions toward forming an ethical and civilized learning environment ([Yoshinov](#)

et al., 2019). This is reinforced by Asrori, who states that religious teachers serve as agents of socio-moral value formation amidst the multicultural realities of society (Asrori, 2016). Furthermore, religious education aims not only to shape religious individuals but also social individuals capable of healthy interactions with their environment (Singha et al., 2023). Therefore, Islamic Religious Education teachers must possess social sensitivity and pedagogical capacity that enable meaningful facilitation processes, both affectively and socially (Khasawneh & Altakhaineh, 2020).

In this role, Islamic Religious Education teachers contribute to realizing the function of education as agents of social transformation. They are not merely transmitters of material, but also inspirators and mentors who facilitate the growth of students' social awareness within the context of diversity and Islamic values *rahmatan lil 'alamin*.

Social Role Modeling in Cultivating Empathy

The social role model demonstrated by the Islamic Religious Education teachers at Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School practically affirms the principle of *uswah hasanah* as stated in the Qur'an, Surah Al-Ahzab, verse 21, which states that the Prophet Muhammad SAW is the best example for believers (Azis, 2024). Instilling a sense of empathy in students is an important step in forming good character (Astuti & Puspitasari, 2022). In the context of Islamic religious education, teachers do not merely convey material, but rather become real figures who reflect the values of patience, steadfastness, openness, and interpersonal concern—values that are consistently referred to as part of a noble character worthy of emulation (Darwin & Nasution, 2023).

Based on interviews with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School, each teacher has a unique role in fostering empathy in students. It does not have to be a religious education teacher, as all teachers have the same role: fostering empathy for their fellow students. Teachers who demonstrate empathy daily will serve as role models for students in responding to others' feelings with understanding. A student said, "Our teacher never gets angry if we make mistakes, instead he talks to us quietly. From that, I learned not to get angry easily with my friends" (Amd, personal communication, February 22, 2025).



Figure 2. Author with students of SMK Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa

As a realization of the concept *uswah hasanah*, Islamic Education teachers implement social role models through daily interactions: greeting students with warmth, reassuring them when they make mistakes, and guiding them to resolve social conflicts through calm and open dialogue. This approach aligns with research findings that role models in education not only transmit values but also trigger the formation of positive social habits – from patience to the ability to build harmonious relationships (Sanusi et al., 2024).

Teaching empathy can be done using various approaches such as group discussions, learning involving cooperation, and practicing simple actions such as listening attentively or assisting needy friends (Putri, 2023). This is equivalent to the theory put forward by Daniel Goleman, whose work in emotional intelligence emphasizes that empathy is one of the most important social skills in social interactions and interpersonal relationships. Empathy involves more than simply understanding what others are feeling, feeling what they are feeling, and responding in a supportive and caring manner (Fithriyana, 2019). According to Daniel Goleman, several aspects of cultivating empathy include the ability to understand and recognize other people's feelings, understand other people's points of view, understand and listen to what other people say, and show attention and concern for others (Kamaruddin et al., 2023).

Further, according to theoretical studies, *uswah hasanah*, role models have a similar effect to mirror neurons in social psychology; students instinctively imitate the behavior of educators they see as good role models; thus, teachers' empathetic behavior will consistently shape students' social response patterns of empathy and caution towards peers (Afidz Nurrohman, 2020).

Teachers also direct students to pay attention to struggling friends through cooperation activities and group discussions. Observations reinforce these findings, showing that teachers often prioritize open dialogue to resolve conflicts between students, mainly when friction arises within social groups or "circles" that form within the school environment. Islamic Religious Education teachers use a restorative approach – encouraging students to talk to each other, express their feelings, and understand each other's perspectives – to reduce potential divisions.

Based on this foundation, Islamic Religious Education teachers function as effective social role models through teaching and daily actions that can shape students' empathy. Implementation of Islamic Religious Education values *uswah hasanah* from QS. Al-Ahzab: 21 This strengthens the legitimacy of the character education approach implemented by Islamic Education teachers at Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School, so that learning becomes a process of internalizing living and contextual values.

Challenges and Strategies in the Multicultural Context of Schools

During adolescence, students search for their identity and seek peer acceptance. Peers have a strong influence on students' behavior. Consequently, groups or circles form where

they can find people with similar interests, values, or experiences and provide mutual support and a sense of security (Munthe, 2024). This conflict often arises from differences of opinion, personal disagreements, or competition between students. This can cause tension, affect the classroom atmosphere, and disrupt learning. This conflict usually involves peer groups with certain social ties that often lead to excluding other individuals or groups (Suherlan & Hidayat, 2023).

If left unaddressed, this kind of tension can lead to bullying. Whether directly or indirectly, this not only damages social relationships between students but also negatively impacts their psychological well-being (Putri, 2023). Students who feel marginalized or unaccepted can experience decreased self-confidence, and even emotional distress that affects their academic performance (Thaib, 2013). Therefore, it is important to recognize and address these conflicts so they do not disrupt a conducive learning environment.

Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School is home to students from diverse regional and cultural backgrounds. This creates complex social dynamics and the potential for conflict between student groups. Field findings indicate a tendency to group students based on region of origin or culture, which sometimes leads to social exclusion.

Interviews with guidance counselors revealed that minor conflicts such as teasing, stereotypes, or personal disagreements frequently arise. If not managed properly, these situations can escalate into psychological bullying. This is where the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers becomes crucial, serving as mediators and promoters of Islamic values that emphasize universal brotherhood (*human brotherhood*).



Figure.3 Author with Guidance and Counseling teacher

In the context of vocational high school students, who often form groups or circles, the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers is crucial in instilling empathy. Teachers act as motivators and administrators, helping students better understand others' feelings, resolve conflicts with a restorative approach, and foster positive social relationships (Munawir et al., 2022). By using the right approach, Islamic Religious Education teachers not only teach religious knowledge but also shape students' character to become more empathetic

individuals, both in interactions within their groups and in society at large. With empathy, students are not only able to resolve conflicts but also develop social skills that will benefit their future (Hartati, 2023).

The teacher initiates a dialogue forum between students, guides them to understand each other's differences, and instills an attitude of the *plague* (please help) and *tolerance* as the foundation of social relationships. Through classroom discussions on diversity, students are encouraged to share their views and experiences in a safe and supportive environment. This provides concrete practice in strengthening empathy and developing emotional intelligence.

Instilling empathy through teacher role models, open dialogue, and integration into spiritual activities is an effective strategy for shaping students' character. Empathy also serves as a means of creating a conducive classroom atmosphere, reducing conflict, and strengthening student solidarity. Islamic Religious Education teachers are strategic actors in building social and emotional harmony in schools, particularly amidst the digital era's challenges and students' cultural heterogeneity.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in instilling empathy in students at Tri Bhakti At-Taqwa Vocational School is very strategic and influential in shaping the students' social character. This role is reflected in three main dimensions: as emotional motivators who encourage students' enthusiasm and sensitivity to their surroundings; as social facilitators who create healthy interaction spaces and reflective dialogue between students; and as social role models who demonstrate empathetic attitudes in real life. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers consistently apply a contextual and integrative pedagogical approach in internalizing the value of empathy through religious activities, collaborative learning, and handling student conflicts with a restorative approach. The results of this study confirm that empathy can be effectively cultivated through role models, supportive interpersonal communication, and learning strategies that emphasize Islamic values of compassion and concern for others. Therefore, strengthening the capacity of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering empathy is an important step in shaping a generation with character, morals, and the ability to live harmoniously in a pluralistic society.

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