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Authenticity of Islamic Religious Education: Actualization of Mindful, Meaningful, and Joyful Principles in Moral Learning at Elementary Schools

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Abstract

The authenticity of Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools faces significant contemporary challenges, shifting from transformative character building toward mechanical cognitive memorization. This study aims to re-actualize the core principles of authentic moral learning through a mindful, meaningful, and joyful paradigm tailored for elementary school students. Using a literature study approach with critical-qualitative analysis, this research examines classical and contemporary pedagogical frameworks to synthesize an integrated moral education model. The findings indicate that mindful learning enhances students' self-awareness and spiritual presence, meaningful learning connects religious doctrines with daily life experiences, and joyful learning fosters intrinsic motivation and emotional well-being. Synthesizing these three elements restores the authenticity of IRE, transforming moral learning from rigid doctrinal instruction into a living, transformative spiritual and ethical experience.

***Keywords**: Authentic education; Joyful learning; Mindful learning; Moral learning; Religious education*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary school and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) levels holds a very central and fundamental position in laying the foundation for students' personality, morals, and spirituality during their golden age. Moral education is not merely a transfer of theoretical knowledge regarding normative religious laws, but a process of internalizing divine values that shape the integrity of a complete human being. However, empirical reality in the field often demonstrates a disjunction between normative ideals and daily pedagogical practices. IRE learning is frequently trapped in a mechanical cognitive orientation, where students are forced to memorize texts, propositions, and laws without understanding their spiritual essence and practical relevance in real life. This phenomenon is triggered by the weakness of transformative learning methodologies that ignore the holistic dimensions of students. The urgency of reassessing the authenticity of Islamic Religious Education stems from the challenges of the modern disruption era and the increasingly alarming complexity of moral decadence among early childhood.[1]

Global challenges, unfiltered digital information exposure, and shifts in social orientation demand a radical transformation in moral learning approaches in elementary schools. Moral learning that loses its authenticity tends to produce fragmented personalities; children become formally and ritually obedient, yet fragile in honesty, empathy, and social concern. The weakness of internalizing religious values in the classroom often stems from conventional methods that ignore the psychological dimensions of students. Therefore, this study raises the grand theme of actualizing three main

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principles of transformative pedagogy namely mindful, meaningful, and joyful as the primary pillars to restore the authenticity of IRE.

The main objective of this research is to conceptually and critically examine how the principles of mindful, meaningful, and joyful can be comprehensively integrated into the design of moral learning in elementary schools. This study explores the philosophical, theological, and psychological foundations of these three principles within the framework of Islamic traditions and modern pedagogy, and formulates their implications for the development of learning praxis in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) and elementary schools (SD). The contribution of this study is expected to provide a new theoretical framework for educators, curriculum developers, and Islamic education practitioners in designing moral learning strategies that do not merely function as a transfer of knowledge, but transform into an authentic transformation of soul and character.[2]

The approach used in this research follows the inductive pattern typical of qualitative literature studies, where the discussion begins with specific propositions based on classroom realities and the moral problems of early-aged children, and then moves toward broader conceptual propositions regarding the reconstruction of the philosophy of Islamic education. Paragraphs are arranged continuously and conceptually bound, ensuring that each transition of ideas reflects a logical continuity from empirical crisis to comprehensive theoretical-pedagogical solutions.[3]

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review outlines the key concepts examined, including the authenticity of Islamic Religious Education, moral learning in elementary schools, and the three main pillars of contemporary pedagogy: mindful learning, meaningful learning, and joyful learning. This study also reviews previous research linking the spiritual, emotional, and cognitive dimensions in children's character building.

The Authenticity of Islamic Religious Education and Moral Learning

Authenticity in Islamic Religious Education refers to the alignment between the substance of Islamic teachings as rahmatan lil 'alamin (a mercy to all creation) and practical implementation in the classroom. Authentic moral learning rejects the reduction of religion merely to a written examination subject oriented solely toward cognitive grade achievements. This approach demands absolute harmony between theoretical values taught by teachers and tangible role models witnessed by students in their daily lives within the school environment. When the spirit of Islamic teachings is authentically translated, schools are no longer rigid places of indoctrination, but transform into living spaces for the cultivation of universal human values.[4]

The essence of tarbiyah (education) in Islamic educational philosophy is the purification of the soul (tazkiyatun nafs) and the formation of noble character rooted in deep divine awareness. This soul-purification process directs students to shed despicable traits such as egoism, intolerance, and hatred, replacing them with nobility of character. In the view of classical and contemporary Islamic educational thinkers, this spiritual and moral dimension is the core mission of the Prophet Muhammad saw., who prioritized the perfection of morals as the highest priority in shaping human civilization.[5]

Moral learning in elementary schools must simultaneously touch the affective and psychomotor dimensions of children, making values of honesty, compassion, and justice part of their living identity. During the golden age, it is not enough to simply tell children the definition of goodness through verbal lectures; rather, they must be directly engaged in meaningful moral experiences. Through habituation grounded in sincerity and a humanistic approach, these noble values will be organically internalized into the child's personality structure, producing a generation of Muslims with robust, moderate character, fully prepared to face contemporary challenges with integrity.[6]

The Principle of Mindful Learning in a Religious Context

Mindful learning is a mental state in which an individual is fully present in the present moment, acknowledging thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and the surrounding environment

with an open, non-judgmental attitude. This approach trains individuals to break free from reactive automatic thought patterns, enabling them to respond to every learning situation with full awareness and mental clarity. At the elementary education level, the application of mindfulness helps children reduce anxiety, extend their attention span, and balance their cognitive capacities.

This concept is closely aligned with the principles of hudhurul qalbu (presence of the heart) and muraqabah (awareness of being watched by Allah). Islamic intellectual tradition since the classical era has emphasized that the quality of an action heavily depends on the purity of intention and the presence of the heart during its execution. When children are encouraged to absorb every second of the learning process, they are not only trained to be intellectually intelligent, but also guided to experience a transcendental closeness to the Creator in their daily activities.[7]

The application of mindful learning in elementary school moral learning trains students not to perform worship or moral actions automatically and mechanically, but with deep appreciation and spiritual awareness. For example, when children learn about honesty or ritual procedures, they are invited to contemplate the essence behind the command, rather than merely fulfilling procedural obligations. Moral appreciation born from inner awareness proves far more effective in building character resilience compared to rigid and coercive indoctrination methods.

The implementation of mindful learning in the classroom creates a safe and supportive emotional ecosystem for children's psychological development. Teachers who apply mindfulness principles will be more sensitive to their students' emotional dynamics, enabling them to respond to children's behavior with compassion rather than anger. This interaction, built on empathy and full presence, helps children recognize their own emotions, learn to regulate anger, and foster compassion toward peers within the school environment.

Pedagogical transformation through the integration of mindful learning and Islamic spiritual values offers a concrete answer to the crisis of emotional alienation frequently experienced by the younger generation in the modern era. By accustoming children to be fully present in the present, elementary schools instill a solid foundation of inner peace. Ultimately, students grow not only into academically successful individuals, but also into personalities possessing spiritual depth, emotional maturity, and robust moral integrity to face the complexities of the era.[8]

The Principle of Meaningful Learning for Life Relevance

Meaningful learning is deeply rooted in constructivist learning theory, where new information is actively connected to relevant concepts already existing within the child's cognitive structure. In this framework, students are not viewed as passive vessels receiving poured information, but as active constructors of knowledge weaving meaning from their daily life experiences. This internalization process ensures that every lesson material holds functional relevance for the intellectual and emotional development of children in elementary schools.

In Islamic Religious Education (IRE), meaningfulness is achieved when matters of aqidah (faith), sharia (law), and akhlaq (morals) are not taught as abstract dogmatism foreign to a child's world, but are directly linked to their daily experiences at school, home, and society. When religious concepts are translated into the empirical reality of children's lives, the gap between normative theory and empirical practice is elegantly bridged. This contextual approach turns the classroom into a living laboratory of life, where divine values dynamically dialogue with the real problems students face.[9]

Children are guided to deeply understand why a noble behavior must be performed and what its impact is on social harmony and inner peace. Through the cultivation of a wisdom-oriented understanding, children grasp the essence of goodness beyond mere procedural compliance. Ultimately, this meaningful learning gives birth to autonomous moral awareness, where students are motivated to do good not out of fear of punishment, but because they realize the intrinsic value and positive impact of those actions on humanity.[10]

The Principle of Joyful Learning in Child Developmental Psychology

Joyful learning is not merely about creating a noisy classroom or aimless game-filled atmosphere, but a psychological condition where the learning process is felt as a joyful internal need,

fostering curiosity and freeing children from anxiety pressure. In the modern pedagogical framework, learning joy is a primary catalyst triggering the release of endorphin hormones in the brain, thereby enhancing memory absorption and active student engagement. This positive psychological atmosphere ensures that school becomes a second home that children look forward to every day.

Approaches suited for the concrete operational phase of elementary school-aged children (7–12 years) such as play, narrative exploration, and smiling role models are key to transferring moral values. Through role-playing, inspirational stories, and art activities, children can naturally explore the meaning of virtue without feeling preached to. This participatory approach proves highly effective in stimulating children's moral imagination, enabling them to internalize religious values with immense enthusiasm and inner joy.[11]

Moral learning delivered in a pressing, rigid, and authoritarian manner often triggers psychological reactance, emotionally pushing children away from religious values. When religious rules are socialized through threats and fear, children tend to obey values not out of awareness, but due to a defensive drive to avoid punishment. Conversely, through a joyful learning ecosystem grounded in compassion, Islamic Religious Education can appear friendly, soothing, and cultivate a deep love within students for their religious teachings.[12]

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review design. This method is deemed most appropriate for examining, synthesizing, and conceptualizing theoretical ideas regarding the authenticity of Islamic Religious Education and the integration of mindful, meaningful, and joyful principles in elementary school moral learning. The subjects of this study focus on scientific literature, textbooks, reputable national and international journal articles, and relevant Islamic education curriculum policy documents.

The primary issue examined is how to overcome the authenticity crisis in IRE learning through pedagogical reform that combines spiritual awareness, contextual meaning, and learning joy for early-aged children. Data collection methods were carried out by searching digital documents using academic databases with targeted search keywords including authentic Islamic religious education, mindful learning in elementary schools, meaningful moral education, and joyful learning in IRE.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis techniques through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The researchers performed a critical reading of the literature texts to identify core themes, compare various expert perspectives, and synthesize a cohesive conceptual framework. To ensure data credibility and transferability, this study applied literature source triangulation by comparing findings from classical Islamic educational theoretical literature with empirical findings from modern contemporary pedagogical research.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In-depth analysis of various literature and conceptual sources indicates that the authenticity of Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools currently suffers from distortion due to the dominance of cognitive-mechanical approaches. Moral learning in many elementary educational institutions remains trapped in low-level cognitive aspects, such as memorizing Quranic texts, hadiths, or fiqh laws without being accompanied by an affective internalization process touching students' inner awareness. Consequently, the religious knowledge acquired by children remains superficial and fails to manifest in daily moral actions when they face complex social situations.

Based on the literature synthesis, restoring IRE authenticity requires a paradigm shift through the actualization of three core principles: mindful, meaningful, and joyful. Specific findings from each dimension are detailed below:

The Mindful Learning Dimension in Moral Learning

The application of mindful principles in IRE learning in elementary schools proves capable of transforming monotonous learning practices into reflective spiritual experiences. When classrooms are

designed to cultivate tranquility, children are invited to release cognitive fatigue and focus their attention entirely on the moral material being studied. This approach facilitates a transition from learning merely driven by curriculum targets toward essential appreciation touching the inner dimension of students. This transformation turns the IRE classroom into a calming yet enlightening space for the development of the child's soul.[13]

Literature findings indicate that simple techniques such as contemplative pauses before starting moral materials, breathing exercises accompanied by short dhikr, and periodic self-reflection (*muhasabah*) help students develop self-regulation. Through brief moments of silence, children learn to calm emotional turbulence before responding to social stimuli in their surroundings. This contemplative practice also strengthens God-awareness (*muraqabah*), where students feel Allah's presence in every breath and small step they take at school.[14]

Elementary-aged children trained to be fully present exhibit higher empathy capacity and more controlled emotional reactivity when facing peer conflicts in the school environment. Instead of responding to disputes with anger or physical aggression, they can pause, evaluate situations, and seek peaceful solutions through deliberation. These mindfulness-based emotional regulation skills form a robust psychological foundation for shaping patient, forgiving personalities with prime mental resilience.[15]

The Meaningful Learning Dimension through Value Contextualization

The literature review confirms that moral meaningfulness is optimally achieved when religious material is directly connected to children's lived experiences. When the learning process is rooted in the empirical world familiar to students' daily lives, abstract normative concepts transform into practical guidelines that are easy to understand and practice. This contextual approach bridges the gap between religious theory in the classroom and the social dynamics they face outside class hours. This ensures that religious education genuinely functions as a moral compass for children's personality development.[16]

Learning about honesty (*shiddiq*) for example, is not merely taught through historical past stories, but directly linked to real situations in class, such as during exams, group work interactions, or managing lost-and-found items at school. Through simulations of authentic cases, children are invited to weigh the ethical consequences of every action choice they make. Direct experience in resolving moral dilemmas honestly strengthens the cognitive and affective structures of children, embedding the value of integrity deeply within their conscience.[17]

This approach eliminates the gap between the religious classroom and children's social reality, allowing religious values to be perceived as a functional, life-saving, and guiding need. Religion is no longer positioned as a mere set of restrictive formal rules, but as an enlightening source of solutions when facing various life problems. Ultimately, meaningful learning produces a generation of students possessing consistency between inner belief, speech, and real actions in society. [18]

The Joyful Learning Dimension and Children's Emotional Health

The joyful aspect of moral learning removes the stigma that religious education is a rigid, punishing, and terrifying discipline. This humanistic approach reverses the old paradigm placing fear as the primary control tool in the classroom, replacing it with emotional warmth and genuine appreciation. A pleasant learning environment lowers children's anxiety levels, allowing them to absorb religious values with an open mind and a liberated spirit. This transformation turns elementary educational institutions into psychologically friendly spaces for child development.

Research findings indicate that approaches based on interactive narratives, role-playing, moral simulations, and consistent positive teacher appreciation foster intrinsic motivation in students. Through active involvement in educational game scenarios, children explore others' perspectives and directly experience the impact of ethical actions.[19] This participatory approach stimulates high learning enthusiasm, where value internalization occurs naturally without external coercion.

Children learn to do good not out of fear of scolding or merely for grades, but because they experience inner joy and emotional satisfaction when sharing kindness with others. This positive

emotional experience reinforces neural pathways in the brain linking altruistic behavior with happiness, making virtue a part of their daily habits. When children enjoy the process of doing good, noble character is organically formed as an expression of autonomous conscience.

The application of joyful learning principles in the classroom strengthens affective relationships between teachers and students, as well as among peers. Teachers who consistently spread smiles, listen to children's grievances patiently, and praise every small progress successfully create a cooperative class climate. Interactions grounded in compassion foster a strong sense of belonging to the learning community, making children feel safe to express, explore, and show empathy without fear of judgment.[20]

The integration of joy within the Love-Based Curriculum presents a welcoming, inspiring, and transformative face of Islamic Religious Education. The younger generation guided through this joyful ecosystem grows not only intellectually intelligent, but also emotionally resilient with a deep love for universal human values. [21]

The integration of mindful, meaningful, and joyful principles produces a comprehensive pedagogical framework termed the 3M Authentic Moral Learning Model (Mindful, Meaningful, Joyful). This model is systematically designed to bridge the gap between religious normative theory and the empirical realities of elementary students' lives. By combining heart presence, contextual relevance, and a joyful emotional climate, the 3M framework offers a transformative solution to moral crises and ethical degradation among youth in the digital era. This holistic approach ensures that value internalization does not occur partially, but touches all dimensions of humanity completely and harmoniously.[22]

This model positions teachers not merely as rigid curriculum instructors, but as facilitators of the soul and living moral exemplars (*uswah hasanah*). This transformative role demands that teachers possess mature emotional and spiritual intelligence, enabling them to design learning experiences touching their students' deepest inner realms. Through consistent modeling, warm interactions, and a dialogic approach, teachers become central figures bringing universal compassionate values to life in classrooms across madrasahs and Islamic elementary schools. This transformation of the educator's role serves as the primary catalyst for creating a safe, inclusive school ecosystem oriented toward the formation of noble character (*akhlaq karimah*).

The implementation of the 3M Model ultimately culminates in forming student profiles with mental resilience, spiritual depth, and solid social integrity. When children are guided in a mindful, meaningful, and joyful atmosphere, they no longer view religion as a frightening normative burden, but as a liberating and joyful guide to life. This model produces academically smart generations while giving birth to *insan kamil* (complete humans) ready to act as agents of peace, spreaders of compassion (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*), and guardians of human values amidst global civilizational dynamics.[23]

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research provide a strong theoretical foundation that the authenticity of Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools can only be achieved if the learning process breaks free from the shackles of dry formalism and shifts toward a humanistic-religious transformative pedagogy. Educational formalism has historically tended to reduce religion to a mere pile of dogmatic texts to be memorized to pass written exams, ignoring the deepest essence of prophetic guidance. When educational institutions fail to touch children's conscience, schools risk producing generations cognitively bright yet morally and spiritually fragile amidst modern civilizational complexities. Therefore, a paradigm shift toward a Love-Based Curriculum is an inevitable historical and sociological necessity. An in-depth discussion of the research findings is comprehensively elaborated through philosophical and psychological reviews below:

First, there is an urgent need for a radical deconstruction of conventional IRE teaching methods that excessively deify cognitive-calculative aspects while ignoring students' affective dimensions. Old teaching traditions frequently treated students as empty vessels to be forcibly filled with a set of abstract and rigid theological rules. In light of elementary school developmental

psychology (ages seven to twelve), logical abstract thinking skills are still in early growth stages, where cognitive structure heavily relies on sensory experiences and concrete empirical realities. Forcing doctrinal religious material without concrete experiential bridges risks causing religious alienation, leading children to view sharia as an oppressive psychological burden rather than an inner soul need.

Addressing this challenge, actualizing mindful principles within moral learning touches transcendental dimensions that authentically awaken God-awareness. Through habituation of heart presence (*hudhurul qalbu*) and awareness of being watched by the Creator (*muraqabah*), children are taught to absorb every virtue with full presence. This aligns with contemporary character education research stating that true morality never stems from fear of administrative sanctions, but from internal awareness permeating the heart, rather than pseudo-compliance born from external coercion. When children are trained to take contemplative pauses and periodic muhasabah, they build prime emotional resilience in responding to peer conflict dynamics at school.

Second, the significance of meaningful learning addresses the challenge of spiritual alienation in a hyper-connected yet meaning-fragile modern era. Today's children live amidst massive, instant, unfiltered digital information flows often morally confusing due to global hedonistic value clashes. If elementary IRE fails to provide relevant, contextual, and solution-oriented answers to their inner struggles, children will seek moral references from external digital sources on the internet that may not align with noble religious values. Therefore, curriculum reconstruction is imperative so that aqidah, sharia, and akhlaq contents are not isolated within theoretical ivory towers far from students' real lives.

Through meaningful learning, teachers act as transformative guides helping students weave religious knowledge fragments into a solid mental map for navigating daily ethical dilemmas. Integrating normative religious materials with children's empirical life realities such as honesty during exams, cooperation in group work, or managing lost items eliminates the gap between the religious classroom and their social world. Thus, students understand the wisdom behind every religious command, motivating them to practice it out of functional awareness rather than mere procedural compliance. This meaningfulness makes religion a living, saving, and enlightening moral compass for their future life journeys.

Third, the essence of joyful learning upholds positive psychology within Madrasah Ibtidaiyah and Islamic Elementary Schools. A pleasant, warm, inclusive, and compassionate classroom atmosphere (*mahabbah*) is a direct reflection of Allah SWT's supreme attributes as Ar-Rahman and Ar-Rahim (The Most Gracious and The Most Merciful). It is an ironic contradiction if religious education, whose essence teaches universal peace and love, is delivered through intimidating, rigid, authoritarian, and tense methods. Repressive pedagogical approaches trigger psychological reactance, causing children to experience emotional trauma and emotionally detach from their religion.

Joy in moral learning does not mean ignoring academic discipline or turning classrooms into aimless playgrounds; rather, it instills autonomous awareness that noble character is the ultimate source of happiness for oneself and others. Through interactive methods like role-playing, inspirational narratives, art exploration, and consistent teacher appreciation, children naturally explore virtuous values. When children feel emotionally safe, uniquely valued, and happy in IRE classes, their emotional attachment to religious teachings grows deeply rooted into permanent moral resilience into adulthood.

The holistic synergy between mindful, meaningful, and joyful principles in this authentic moral learning model creates a school ecosystem acting as a social laboratory for building a dignified national civilization. This transformation demands collective commitment from all stakeholders from madrasah principals, teachers, parents, to policymakers to abandon reductionist bureaucratic educational patterns. By placing compassion, sincerity, and empathy at the core of all educational processes, Islamic elementary educational institutions can fully execute their primary mandate: producing intellectually smart, emotionally mature, spiritually rich generations acting as a mercy to all creation (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*).

CONCLUSION

The authenticity of Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools is an absolute prerequisite for producing generations not only smart in formal rituals, but possessing solid moral integrity and spiritual sensitivity. This study concludes that restoring this authenticity can be achieved by simultaneously actualizing three pedagogical pillars: mindful learning (inner awareness and full presence), meaningful learning (meaningfulness and value contextualization in real life), and joyful learning (student joy and emotional health). The integration of these three principles transforms IRE classrooms from rigid memorization spaces into enlightening, joyful life laboratories.

The implications of this research demand reforms in school operational curriculum design, enhancement of IRE teachers' pedagogical competence in experience-based learning management, and a shift in evaluation orientation from mere cognitive measurement to authentic assessment of daily behavioral changes. The limitation of this study lies in its purely conceptual-literary nature without direct empirical field testing. Therefore, future researchers are advised to conduct experimental studies or Classroom Action Research (CAR) to empirically test the effectiveness of implementing this 3M-based learning model across various Madrasah Ibtidaiyah and elementary schools.

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