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Religious Education Learning Media for Children with Special Needs: Teachers' Experiences in Addressing Learning Difficulties

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ABSTRACT

Providing equitable religious education for children with special needs requires learning media that accommodate diverse sensory and cognitive characteristics. While previous studies have examined inclusive education and assistive technologies, little is known about teachers' lived experiences in adapting religious learning media across different disability groups. This study explores how teachers select, adapt, and implement religious learning media, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ to support inclusive religious learning. A qualitative phenomenological design was conducted at Aneuk Nanggroe Special School, Aceh, Indonesia, involving five teachers selected through purposive sampling until data saturation was achieved. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis and analyzed using Giorgi's phenomenological reduction. The findings show that teachers continuously adapt learning media to students' sensory and cognitive characteristics while integrating collaborative teaching, differentiated instruction, and institutional support to foster active participation in religious learning. Based on these findings, the study proposes a conceptual model of inclusive religious learning that integrates adaptive learning media, collaborative pedagogy, and active student participation to strengthen religious understanding, practical religious skills, and learner independence. The study extends the application of Inclusive Education, Universal Design for Learning, and Assistive Technology within Islamic religious education and offers practical guidance for developing more inclusive learning environments in special schools.

Keywords: *Inclusive Religious Learning, Children with Special Needs, Adaptive Learning Media, Inclusive Education*

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ABSTRAK

Penyediaan pendidikan agama yang setara bagi anak berkebutuhan khusus memerlukan media pembelajaran yang mampu mengakomodasi keragaman karakteristik sensorik dan kognitif peserta didik. Meskipun berbagai penelitian telah mengkaji pendidikan inklusif dan teknologi bantu, masih sedikit penelitian yang mengeksplorasi pengalaman langsung guru dalam mengadaptasi media pembelajaran agama pada berbagai kategori disabilitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi bagaimana guru memilih, mengadaptasi, dan mengimplementasikan media pembelajaran agama, tantangan yang mereka hadapi, serta strategi yang digunakan untuk mendukung pembelajaran agama yang inklusif. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif fenomenologis yang dilaksanakan di Sekolah Luar Biasa (SLB) Aneuk Nanggroe, Aceh, Indonesia, dengan melibatkan lima orang guru yang dipilih secara purposive hingga mencapai kejenuhan data (*data saturation*). Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan studi dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan prosedur reduksi fenomenologis Giorgi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru secara berkelanjutan mengadaptasi media pembelajaran sesuai dengan karakteristik sensorik dan kognitif peserta didik, serta mengintegrasikan pembelajaran kolaboratif, pembelajaran berdiferensiasi, dan dukungan kelembagaan untuk mendorong partisipasi aktif dalam pembelajaran agama. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian ini mengusulkan model konseptual pembelajaran agama inklusif yang mengintegrasikan media pembelajaran adaptif, pedagogi kolaboratif, dan partisipasi aktif peserta didik guna memperkuat pemahaman keagamaan, keterampilan praktik ibadah, serta kemandirian belajar peserta didik. Penelitian ini memperluas penerapan perspektif *Inclusive Education*, *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL), dan *Assistive Technology* dalam konteks pendidikan agama Islam, sekaligus memberikan implikasi praktis bagi guru dan sekolah luar biasa dalam mengembangkan lingkungan pembelajaran agama yang lebih inklusif.

Kata Kunci: *Pembelajaran Agama Inklusif, Anak Berkebutuhan Khusus, Media Pembelajaran Adaptif, Pendidikan Inklusif.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious education plays an essential role in fostering children's moral, spiritual, and character development. Every child, including children with special needs (CWSN), has the right to equitable access to meaningful religious education. However, many CWSN experience sensory and cognitive barriers that make religious concepts difficult to understand. Students with visual impairment, hearing impairment, and intellectual disability therefore require adaptive instructional approaches and learning media that accommodate their diverse learning characteristics. Selecting appropriate learning media is consequently fundamental to achieving inclusive religious education.

Educational media have been recognized as effective tools for reducing learning barriers by improving motivation, conceptual understanding, and

classroom participation (Nusir et al., 2013). Because learning characteristics vary considerably across disability categories, instructional media should be adapted to learners' individual needs rather than applying a single instructional approach. This need is reinforced by national educational data showing that students with disabilities continue to experience substantially lower educational attainment than their non-disabled peers, highlighting the importance of more accessible instructional practices, including religious education (Tim Schoolmedia, 2023).

The present study is informed by three complementary perspectives. Inclusive Education emphasizes equitable participation for all learners through collaborative support from teachers, families, and schools (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) advocates flexible instructional design that accommodates learner diversity through multiple forms of representation, engagement, and expression. Meanwhile, Assistive Technology highlights the role of adaptive tools, such as Braille materials, audio guidance, sign language, and other assistive media, in overcoming sensory and cognitive barriers (Köse & Güner-Yildiz, 2021). Together, these perspectives suggest that effective religious learning media should be adaptive, accessible, and supported by an inclusive learning environment.

Previous studies have primarily examined individualized instruction (Hjörne & Säljö, 2019), inclusive learning environments (Singal et al., 2021), participation of students with disabilities in school activities (Stentiford et al., 2023), and collaborative roles of teachers and parents in implementing inclusive Islamic religious education (Salabi, 2023). Other studies have explored learning media in mathematics and general education (Barida & Widyastuti, 2019) and specific religious contexts, such as Qur'an memorization for students with autism or visual impairment (Amani et al., 2021; Nugroho et al., 2022). Although these studies provide valuable insights, they generally focus on a single disability category or evaluate instructional outcomes rather than teachers' lived experiences in adapting religious learning media across different groups of learners.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores teachers' lived experiences in selecting, adapting, and implementing Islamic religious learning media for students with visual impairment, hearing impairment, and intellectual disability within one special school. Using a phenomenological approach, the study interprets these experiences through the complementary perspectives of Inclusive Education, Universal Design for Learning, and Assistive Technology. Specifically, it addresses three questions: (1) What

religious learning media do teachers use for students with different disabilities?
(2) What challenges do teachers encounter in implementing these media? and
(3) What strategies do teachers employ to overcome students' learning difficulties?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore teachers' lived experiences in adapting religious learning media for children with special needs. Phenomenology was chosen because it enables researchers to understand participants' experiences from their own perspectives while minimizing prior assumptions (Giorgi, 2011). The study was conducted at Aneuk Nanggroe Special School, Aceh, Indonesia, which provides educational services for students with visual impairment, hearing impairment, and intellectual disability.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Five teachers participated based on three criteria: (1) holding professional qualifications in special education, (2) having at least five years of teaching experience, and (3) actively using religious learning media in classroom instruction. Data saturation was reached after the fifth participant, as no substantially new themes emerged during the analysis. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research and Community Service Institute of the State Islamic Institute of Lhokseumawe (No. B-247/In.29/P2.1/TL.00/08/2023), and all participants provided written informed consent.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Teacher Criteria	PARTICIPANTS				
	A	B	C	D	E
Age	41	39	43	35	39
Education	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Employee Status	Government Teacher	Honorary Teacher	Government Teacher	Government Teacher	Government Teacher
Teaching Experience	7 years	5 Years 3 Months	9 years	5 Years 3 Months	6 years
Professional Certification	Certified	Certified	Certified	Certified	Certified
Professional Training	Learning Design for Children with Special Needs	Learning Media in Special Schools	Learning Design for Children with Special Needs	Learning Design for Children with Special Needs	Practical Techniques for Teaching Children with Special Needs

Data were collected between July and November 2023 through non-participant classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document review. Each participant was observed during classroom instruction and interviewed once for approximately 25–30 minutes. Observations focused on the implementation of religious learning media and students' responses, while interviews explored teachers' experiences, challenges, and instructional strategies.

Data were analyzed using Giorgi's (2011) phenomenological reduction, comprising epoché (bracketing), horizontalization, thematic coding, and textural-structural synthesis to identify the essence of teachers' experiences. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation across observations, interviews, and documents, as well as member checking with participants to verify the accuracy of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Teachers' Use of Religious Learning Media for Students with Visual, Hearing, and Intellectual Disabilities

Observations and interviews showed that teachers selected religious learning media according to students' sensory and cognitive characteristics rather than applying a single instructional approach. Adaptive media were used to facilitate students' understanding of Islamic concepts and worship practices.

1. Students with Visual Impairment

Teachers primarily used tactile and auditory media, including Braille Qur'ans, tactile boards, prayer mats with physical guides, and audio-assisted prayer devices. Learning emphasized direct practice to help students understand religious concepts through touch and repeated experience.

One teacher explained: "*For blind students, verbal explanation alone is insufficient. I use Braille Qur'ans, tactile materials, and real objects. When teaching worship, I rely on direct practice because students learn better through experience than through listening.*" (Teacher A, Interview, 21 July 2023)

Classroom observations confirmed that tactile media supported students in recognizing Arabic letters, memorizing prayer recitations, and performing worship more independently.

2. Students with Hearing Impairment

For students with hearing impairment, teachers relied on visual media supported by sign language, teacher demonstrations, instructional videos, and hearing aids. Learning emphasized repeated visual modelling rather than verbal explanation.

As one participant stated: "*Students understand religious practices more easily when I demonstrate each movement directly and reinforce it with sign language and instructional videos*" (Teacher B, Interview, 25 July 2023). Observations showed that repeated visual demonstrations increased students' participation and improved the accuracy of worship movements.

3. Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Teachers combined concrete learning media with intensive physical guidance. Frequently used media included picture cards, flashcards, posters, animated videos, dolls, ablution practice equipment, and real objects integrated with repeated demonstrations.

One participant explained: "*Students quickly lose concentration if I only explain verbally. Therefore, I use pictures, videos, real objects, and repeated practice until they understand*" (Teacher C, Interview, 23 July 2023). Observations indicated that these multisensory activities increased students' attention, participation, confidence, and ability to remember sequences of worship practices.

Overall, the findings indicate that teachers continuously adapted religious learning media to students' individual characteristics, enabling greater conceptual understanding, participation, and independence in religious learning.

Factors Influencing Teachers' Use of Religious Learning Media

The findings identified three interrelated factors shaping teachers' use of religious learning media: teacher competency, school facilities, and flexible student grouping.

1. Teacher Competency

Teachers demonstrated different levels of competence in adapting learning media to students' diverse needs. Although all participants prepared instructional media before class, they emphasized that effective religious instruction required continuous adaptation rather than a single teaching strategy.

One participant explained: *"I prepare learning media according to students' needs. For visually impaired students, I use Braille Qur'ans, tactile boards, audio guidance, and adaptive prayer mats"* (Teacher A, Interview, 23 July 2023). Observations confirmed that teachers combined tactile, visual, auditory, and practical media according to students' abilities. Participants also acknowledged that additional training in adaptive instructional media and assistive technology would further strengthen their teaching competence.

2. School Facilities

Teachers identified adaptive learning facilities as an important factor supporting inclusive religious instruction. The school provided Braille Qur'ans, hearing aids, tactile pathways, adaptive software, and flexible classroom spaces. However, participants consistently reported that existing resources remained insufficient.

One participant stated: *"Our school still needs a dedicated therapy room equipped with appropriate facilities so that students receive more comprehensive support"* (Teacher D, Interview, 1 August 2023). Observations also showed that teachers frequently modified available teaching materials to compensate for limited specialized resources.

3. Flexible Student Grouping

Teachers organized students into flexible instructional groups according to disability type and learning objectives, particularly during practical worship sessions. Observation sessions showed that two to four teachers simultaneously supervised different groups, enabling more individualized instruction. Teachers explained that this arrangement allowed learning media and instructional support to be adapted more effectively to students' needs.

Table 2. Presents the Distribution of Students Across Disability Categories

Class	Visual Impairment	Hearing Impairment	Intellectual Disability	Total
Cut Mutia	3	1	5	9
Seulanga	2	2	3	7
Tgk. Umar	1	5	3	9
Tgk. Chik Ditiro	3	2	5	10
Hamzah Fansuri	2	3	4	9
Ar-Raniry	1	1	5	7
Syah Kuala	4	1	4	9
Total	16	15	29	60

Source: School Documentation (2023).

Table 2 indicates that students with intellectual disabilities constituted the largest group ($n = 29$), followed by students with visual impairment ($n = 16$) and hearing impairment ($n = 15$). This distribution influenced instructional planning and classroom organization. Overall, teacher competence, adaptive facilities, and flexible instructional organization collectively shaped teachers' decisions in selecting and implementing religious learning media.

Teachers' Strategies for Helping Children with Special Needs Overcome Learning Difficulties

The findings show that teachers addressed students' learning difficulties through collaborative teaching and adaptive instructional methods tailored to individual learning characteristics.

1. Collaborative Teaching

Collaboration among teachers emerged as an important strategy for supporting students with different disabilities. Teachers coordinated lesson planning and divided students into smaller groups to provide more individualized assistance. One participant explained: *"We divide students into smaller groups according to their needs so each teacher can provide more intensive guidance."* (Teacher B, Interview, 19 August 2023)

Observations showed that collaborative teaching enabled teachers to combine sign language, tactile media, audio guidance, and physical assistance within the same lesson, thereby improving classroom management and individualized support.

2. Adaptive Instructional Methods

Teachers consistently combined direct instruction, demonstrations, peer tutoring, repeated practice, and differentiated instruction. As one participant stated: *"I combine explanation, demonstration, and repeated practice because students learn better when they can observe, imitate, and practice directly."* (Teacher D, Interview, 12 August 2023)

Classroom observations confirmed that lessons generally began with brief explanations followed by demonstrations using adaptive learning media. Teachers then provided individual guidance while students practiced independently. Peer tutoring was frequently used with students who had hearing impairment and intellectual disabilities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that teachers continuously modified instructional methods, learning media, and classroom organization according to students' sensory, cognitive, and communication characteristics. These adaptive

practices enabled children with special needs to participate more actively in religious learning and gradually develop greater independence in understanding and practicing religious teachings.

Discussion

This study explored teachers' experiences in selecting, adapting, and implementing religious learning media for children with special needs. The findings indicate that successful religious learning depends not only on the availability of adaptive media but also on the interaction between teacher competence, collaborative instructional practices, school support, and students' active participation. These findings suggest that inclusive religious education should be understood as an integrated instructional system rather than a collection of isolated teaching tools.

Adaptive Religious Learning Media as the Foundation of Inclusive Instruction

The findings demonstrate that teachers intentionally adapted religious learning media to students' sensory and cognitive characteristics. Braille Qur'ans, tactile boards, audio-guidance systems, sign language, picture cards, videos, and concrete teaching aids were selected according to students' learning needs rather than applied uniformly across disability groups. These findings support the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018), which emphasize multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to ensure learning accessibility. The findings also extend previous studies (Nusir et al., 2013; Yahya & Noor, 2015) by showing that adaptive media in Islamic religious education facilitate not only conceptual understanding but also the acquisition of practical religious skills. Students learned religious practices through tactile experience, repeated demonstrations, and guided participation rather than through verbal instruction alone. This reinforces the Assistive Technology perspective (Köse & Güner-Yildiz, 2021), which argues that adaptive media become effective only when aligned with learners' functional characteristics.

Teacher Competency and School Support Strengthen Inclusive Learning

The study further shows that learning media alone cannot ensure effective instruction. Their effectiveness depends largely on teachers' ability to adapt instructional strategies and integrate assistive media into classroom practice.

Consistent with Köse and Güner-Yildiz (2021), the findings indicate that teacher competence is central to maximizing the educational value of assistive technology. Participants also emphasized that professional development activities and collaborative learning among teachers contributed to improving their instructional practices.

Institutional support emerged as another important factor. Although the school provided several adaptive learning resources, limited facilities—particularly specialized therapy rooms and additional assistive media—restricted opportunities for individualized instruction. From the perspective of Inclusive Education (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019), accessibility therefore depends not only on physical resources but also on the school's capacity to organize human resources, professional development, and instructional support into a coherent system.

Collaborative Pedagogy Promotes Meaningful Participation

Another important finding concerns the collaborative nature of religious instruction. Teachers rarely worked independently; instead, they shared responsibilities through team teaching, coordinated lesson planning, and flexible grouping based on students' disability characteristics.

These findings support the collaborative principles of Inclusive Education (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019) while extending previous studies emphasizing individualized instruction (Hjörne & Säljö, 2019). Within the present context, collaboration enabled individualized learning without requiring one teacher for each student, making inclusive instruction more feasible in schools with limited human resources.

The findings also reinforce Singal et al. (2021), who highlighted the importance of collaborative school environments. In this study, collaboration involved not only teachers but also school leadership and coordinated instructional planning, creating a more sustainable support system for inclusive religious education.

Religious Learning Media Foster Active Religious Participation

The findings further indicate that adaptive media, differentiated instruction, peer tutoring, and repeated demonstrations encouraged students to participate actively in religious learning.

Consistent with Bernard et al. (2019) and Strain and Smith (1996), adaptive instructional support increased students' confidence, participation, and independence. However, this study extends previous research by

demonstrating that participation in Islamic religious education includes students' ability to understand, practice, and independently perform acts of worship. Religious learning media, therefore, promote not only cognitive engagement but also behavioral and spiritual participation. This finding broadens previous studies focusing primarily on Qur'an memorization (Amani et al., 2021; Nugroho et al., 2022) by highlighting the role of adaptive media in developing practical religious competence.

Toward a Conceptual Model of Inclusive Religious Learning

Building on the empirical findings, this study proposes a conceptual model of inclusive religious learning that integrates three interrelated dimensions: adaptive learning media, collaborative pedagogy, and active student participation. Together, these dimensions explain how inclusive religious learning is achieved through the interaction between accessible instructional media, collaborative teaching practices, institutional support, and meaningful student engagement. Rather than viewing adaptive media as isolated instructional tools, the model positions them within a broader pedagogical system that promotes religious understanding, practical religious skills, and students' independence in worship. The proposed model is presented in Figure 1.

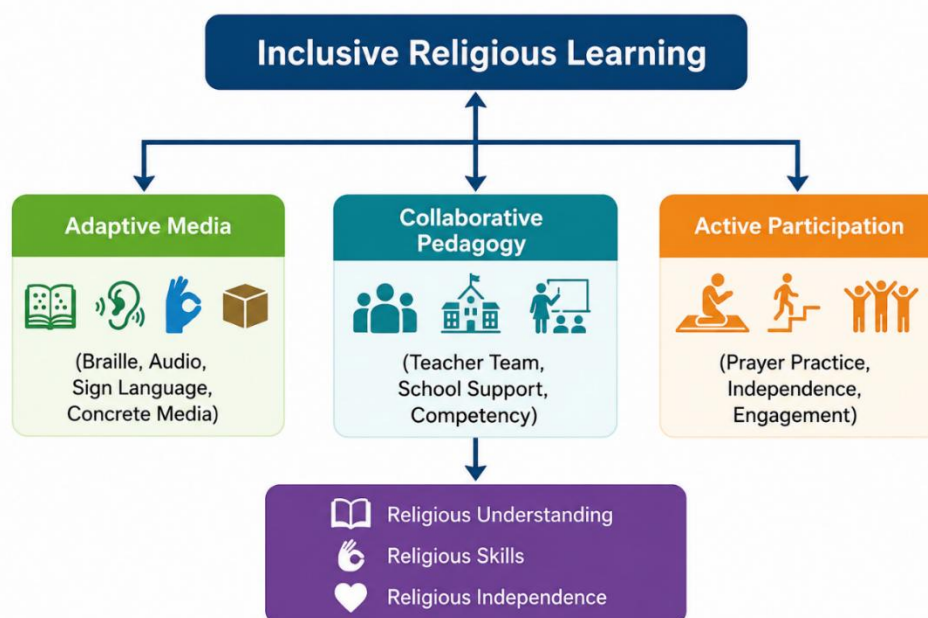


Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Inclusive Religious Learning Based on Teachers' Experiences

Figure 1 illustrates that adaptive learning media constitute the foundation of accessible religious instruction by accommodating students' diverse sensory

and cognitive characteristics. Their effectiveness is strengthened through collaborative pedagogy, including teacher competence, team teaching, and institutional support, which together create learning environments that encourage students' active participation. Through this interaction, students gradually develop deeper religious understanding, practical worship skills, and greater religious independence. The proposed model therefore extends the perspectives of Inclusive Education, Universal Design for Learning, and Assistive Technology by integrating adaptive media, collaborative instructional practices, and active participation into a unified framework for Islamic religious education for children with special needs.

CONCLUSION

This study explored teachers' lived experiences in adapting religious learning media for children with special needs within Islamic religious education. The findings demonstrate that inclusive religious learning is shaped not only by adaptive instructional media but also by the interaction of teacher competence, collaborative pedagogy, institutional support, and students' active participation. Rather than relying on a single instructional approach, teachers continuously modified learning media and teaching strategies to accommodate students' diverse sensory and cognitive characteristics.

The study contributes theoretically by extending the perspectives of Inclusive Education, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Assistive Technology into the context of Islamic religious education. It proposes a conceptual model in which adaptive learning media, collaborative instructional practices, and active student participation operate as interconnected dimensions that support religious understanding, practical religious skills, and greater learner independence.

Practically, the findings highlight the need to strengthen teachers' professional development, expand adaptive learning resources, and reinforce collaborative support systems within special schools. Although the study was conducted in a single special school with five teacher participants, the phenomenological approach provides rich contextual insights into inclusive religious learning. Future research is encouraged to examine the proposed conceptual model across different educational contexts and disability groups while incorporating the perspectives of students, parents, and school leaders.

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