



Islamic religious education teachers' strategies for instructional innovation to enhance the learning culture among students at Two State Senior High Schools

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Abstract

This study aims to uncover Islamic religious education teachers' strategies for innovative learning to improve school culture for students and to determine the roles of the principal, vice principal, and teachers in implementing Islamic religious education teachers' strategies for innovative learning to improve school culture for students at two State Senior High Schools in Palu City. This dissertation uses a comparative qualitative study with a multi-site design. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The research subjects were the principal, vice principal, teachers, and students. Data analysis techniques included data reduction, data presentation, and verification. The results show that the two schools schedule religious activities, including memorizing the Qur'an, reciting the Qur'an, performing Dhuha prayers in congregation, performing Zikr, giving sermons, and performing Dhuhr prayers in congregation. The schools also implement program dares to be intelligent, dares to be active in congregation, must be able to recite the Quran, and provide Iqra' books. The principal's roles include supporting, evaluating, and guiding all students. The vice principal's roles include supporting the principal.

Meanwhile, the teacher's role is guiding. Both schools use coaching outside teaching hours, the singing method in learning, and the deep learning method in their teaching. Learning can be understood in both theory and practice, bringing Islamic religious education teacher guidance into school life. The local governor's program is considered brave and smart, and a continuous motivation method that improves students' ability to read the Qur'an, use digital learning, and develop a habit of moderate socialization.

Keywords: Teachers' strategy, Learning innovation, School culture, Students

Introduction

In the 21st century widely known as the digital era rapid technological advancements have significantly impacted the education landscape (AlAmmary, 2012; Almeqdadi & Al Zoubi, 2022) ^[1, 2]. This shift brings increasingly complex and demanding challenges for teachers. In this digital age, teachers must possess technological proficiency that surpasses that of their students, as integrating technology is essential to delivering high-quality instruction. The current digital era calls for educators who can navigate the technological challenges inherent in education. A key challenge is preparing teachers to use technology effectively and build their skills with the latest tools to meet contemporary educational goals. Consequently, teachers as vital educational stakeholders play a crucial role in the learning process within the digital era.

Furthermore, 21st-century educators must be prepared for the Industry 4.0 era; such readiness is demonstrated by their ability to integrate ICT into instruction. This requirement stems from the understanding that using tangible or concrete media boosts student engagement and facilitates a better understanding of the material. Thus, instructional media must constantly evolve to keep pace with the times, and educators are expected to master these tools. Technology-based instructional media empower educators to adopt more innovative and creative teaching approaches, requiring a commitment to continuous learning about using such media in the classroom.

In the Industry 4.0 era, education policies must rapidly adapt to digital transformations and labor market demands by integrating digital innovations and best practices into teaching and learning. Effective policies and robust regulations ensure that educational institutions not only meet quality standards but also foster creativity and adapt to global changes, thereby delivering relevant, high-quality education to students at all levels. For Muslims, Islamic education is an essential and inseparable part of life; it serves not merely as a means of acquiring knowledge but also as a guiding framework that provides clear direction and purpose. Islamic religious education in schools aims to cultivate students who not only possess a sound understanding of their faith but also demonstrate mutual respect for people of other religions. In this context, an inclusive approach to Islamic religious education can help students see that Islam is a religion of mercy to all creation one that promotes peace and respect for diversity.

Within the national education system, religious education plays a pivotal role in achieving the goals of Indonesia's national education. This is enshrined in the 2007 Government Regulation on Religious Education and Religious Affairs, which defines religious education as instruction that imparts knowledge while shaping students' attitudes, personalities, and skills in practicing their religious teachings. This objective is achieved by including relevant learning content and instruction

across all educational pathways, levels, and types. The Islamic Religious Education curriculum must be designed to be dynamic and adaptable to the social and technological changes occurring in society. A rigid, inflexible curriculum would only limit students' ability to comprehend and apply Islamic values. Integrating digital technology into Islamic religious education instruction gives teachers opportunities to present material in a more interactive and flexible way, engaging students more effectively. Through multimedia tools, simulations, and digital applications, religious education content can be packaged dynamically, enabling students to access and study the material at their convenience.

Global collaboration in education is increasingly becoming an integral part of the modern learning experience, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and perspectives on an international scale. Such collaboration enables institutions and students to connect with diverse cultures, methodologies, and educational practices worldwide. Through joint projects, exchange programs, and digital platforms, students can gain broader insights and develop the skills necessary to function in the global marketplace. Furthermore, this collaboration opens opportunities for research and innovation that draw on diverse disciplines and resources from around the globe. By integrating global perspectives into the curriculum, educational institutions not only enrich the learning experience but also prepare students to face global challenges with enhanced understanding and cross-cultural skills. Based on this context, the author conducted research at two public high schools in Palu City specifically, general public schools that include Islamic religious education in their curricula.

Literature review

Teaching innovation

Updating instructional practices is crucial for educators. Through these updates, teachers can create a learning atmosphere that is enjoyable, stimulating, dynamic, spirited, and challenging (Askar, Nurdin, Pettalongi, Pettalongi, & Basire, 2025; Rustina *et al.*, 2026) ^[3, 16]. This environment facilitates knowledge acquisition for students and enables teachers to instill noble values, ultimately helping achieve lesson objectives. An innovative curriculum integrates 21st-century skills such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and creativity into the subject matter (Jabir, Nurdin, Saguni, & Mala, 2026) ^[8]. This approach focuses not only on academic content but also on preparing students for success in a dynamic workforce. Curriculum innovation also entails collaboration with industry and stakeholders to ensure relevance and workforce readiness. Creating an educational environment that is flexible and accessible to all students is a key aspect of innovation. This involves developing solutions that enable remote learning and provide access to educational materials for students from diverse backgrounds and with varying needs. Flexibility regarding the time and location of learning helps overcome potential obstacles students may face and offers greater opportunities for success.

Innovations in instruction ensure that the learning process runs smoothly, actively, creatively, and in a conducive environment;

this fosters students' enthusiasm for learning, facilitates the achievement of learning objectives, and ultimately boosts academic performance (Jankowska & Atlay, 2008) ^[9]. High-quality educators are essential to meet the demands of the times, as they exert a profound influence on education; indeed, quality education stems from quality educators. Consequently, educators are expected to innovate continuously developing themselves and their professional competencies to become high-quality teachers. Instructional innovation also encompasses approaches or techniques introduced by educators that are considered novel, designed to facilitate student progress in both the learning process and outcomes. The primary goal of instructional innovation is to enhance capabilities specifically regarding resources such as personnel, funding, and facilities, as well as organizational structures and procedures to ensure that planned objectives are achieved optimally. Meanwhile, the benefits of implementing such innovations include improving upon previous conditions, providing a model for others to pilot the new methods, encouraging the continuous expansion of knowledge and insight, and fostering a renewed spirit in one's work.

Educators need to innovate in their teaching practices to make learning more meaningful. Teachers must possess both the willingness and the ability to introduce creative elements into their instruction (Buck, Mast, Ehlers, & Franklin, 2005; Cahill *et al.*, 2014) ^[4]. This benefits both students and teachers; educators gain a deeper understanding and broader insight into new teaching methods, instructional techniques, and approaches to student engagement. Ultimately, this enhances their professional competence, enabling them to become high-quality educators. Being a high-quality educator requires extensive experience and knowledge to ensure that the implemented learning models do not lead to student boredom. High-quality teachers ensure that education is more organized, fostering a superior educational environment that produces high-caliber students. In an era of rapid technological disruption and global change, the education sector faces many new challenges and opportunities. As the vanguard of the learning process, teachers must adapt and innovate to guide the nation's next generation toward a bright future. Teacher innovation goes beyond using the latest technology; it includes developing creative, effective, learner-centered teaching strategies and methods. Innovative educators constantly seek new ways to improve learning quality, spark student interest, and equip learners with essential 21st-century skills. Educator innovation plays a crucial role in improving student learning outcomes; innovative teachers create active, engaging, and challenging learning environments that encourage students to participate more fully in the learning process and achieve optimal results.

Characteristics of creative teachers

A creative teacher is one capable of generating effective ideas to address the challenges they face (Dahri, Yahaya, Al-Rahmi, Almogren, & Vighio, 2024; Genç, 2016) ^[6, 7]. Being an educator is no easy task; teachers often encounter issues in the school environment, such as teaching methods that cause

students to become bored or struggle to grasp the material. An educator's role is to solve these problems by developing effective ideas that not only resolve issues but also engage students during the learning process. Furthermore, a creative teacher can weigh various factors carefully before making a final decision about classroom instruction. Teachers must also be open-minded toward new ideas; they need to adapt to changing times, as the evolving era inevitably influences students. As times change, so do students' characteristics and behaviors; consequently, teachers must adapt to these shifts, bridging the generational gap to build close connections with their students.

An educator must be able to examine issues in detail; a teacher needs to be sensitive to students and observant of changes in their behavior. If a student undergoes a negative change such as becoming lazy the educator must quickly recognize the shift and help the student resolve the underlying problem. Teachers must also be capable of generating new ideas; being a creative educator means devising and discovering novel approaches that facilitate the learning process and engage students' interest in the lesson. An educator's creativity is evident in the new ideas they generate and their successful implementation. A teacher's approach to instructional innovation often centers on creativity as a defining characteristic, a perspective that aligns with Western epistemological studies. Various methods of acquiring knowledge differ fundamentally; these methods have evolved into distinct schools of thought within epistemology. In Western philosophy, several such schools have emerged, namely Empiricism, rationalism, positivism, and intuitionism. First, the school of Empiricism holds that individuals acquire knowledge through sensory experience; for instance, one knows ice is cold by touching it and that sugar is sweet by tasting it. A key figure in this school is John Locke (1632–1704). Second is the school of Rationalism, which posits that the mind is the foundation of certain knowledge. True knowledge is obtained and measured through the mind specifically, through the intellect's ability to grasp objects. A prominent figure associated with this school is René Descartes (1596–1650). Third is the school of Positivism. While aligned with Empiricism, this school adds the nuance that, although the senses are crucial for acquiring knowledge, they must be sharpened using tools and reinforced through experimentation. A key figure here is Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Fourth is the school of Intuitionism. This school argues that both the senses and the mind are limited; since the objects we perceive are constantly changing, knowledge regarding them is never static. The intellect can only comprehend an object by focusing intently upon it. Consequently, humans cannot grasp the whole, nor can they fully understand the object's enduring characteristics. A key figure in this school is Henri Bergson (1859–1941). From these points, it can be concluded that the characteristics of learning innovation represent the distinctive features of the various approaches to "refreshing" or innovating educational practices initiatives undertaken by teachers or education professionals, particularly when examining concepts and analyzing contemporary teaching techniques.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative methods. In qualitative research, theory serves only as a guide for data gathering and analysis (Nurdin & Pettalongi, 2022; Nurdin, Stockdale, & Scheepers, 2016) ^[10, 13]. The data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and written document analysis at the research site (Rusli, Hasyim, & Nurdin, 2021; Rusli & Nurdin, 2022) ^[14, 15]. The research was conducted in two government senior high schools in Palu city, Indonesia. The researcher chose the schools because they are reputable government school that implements interactive digital-based learning in Islamic education. The results of this study can serve as a reference and guideline for integrating local language into Islamic religion instruction and for making schools models for other educational institutions. Data were collected through direct observation, focus group discussion, in-depth interviews, and written document analysis. The interviews involved the school principal, five teachers, and ten students. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were reviewed with participants to obtain their consent (Nurdin, Scheepers, & Stockdale, 2022; Nurdin, Stockdale, & Scheepers, 2014) ^[11, 12]. The data analysis used a deductive approach, interpreted as a research procedure that produces deductive data from interviews and field notes. Data analysis used thematic analysis following Strauss and Corbin (1998) ^[17]. The analysis started with open, axial, and selective coding. The final result of the data analysis is the set of themes identified.

Results and Discussion

Strategies of Islamic religious education teachers in instructional innovation

In social life, knowledge has become the foundation of civilizational progress, as technological, economic, and social developments stem from continuous processes of learning and research. Knowledge serves not only worldly purposes but also helps us comprehend the greatness of God and better practice religious teachings. It is a key factor in improving the quality of human life, enabling individuals to distinguish right from wrong and make wise decisions. Knowledge plays a pivotal role in shaping critical, creative, and rational mindsets, thereby equipping people to face life's various challenges. Without knowledge, individuals easily fall prey to ignorance and error; thus, lifelong learning is essential. Through knowledge, people can elevate their status and dignity while bringing broader benefits to their families, communities, and the nation.

Advancements in science and technology during the era of globalization have brought about rapidly accelerating changes across nearly every aspect of life, including education. The rapid influx of information, the evolution of digital technology, and easy access to diverse learning resources compel educational institutions to adapt continuously to avoid falling behind. Education is no longer merely about "teaching" knowledge; it must also equip learners with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. Teachers also face challenges regarding the behavioral changes of students living in the digital age—a

generation born and raised in an environment defined by the internet, social media, and various digital applications. These students typically grasp visual and interactive information more readily than they do through monotonous lecture-based methods. Consequently, educators must innovate their teaching practices to align with today's students' learning styles and needs. As one informant noted:

Instructional innovation is essential to ensure the learning process enhances the quality of educational outcomes and keeps pace with the times. This underscores the fact that learning must not remain stagnant; rather, it must be dynamic and responsive to social changes.

In the face of globalization and advancements in information technology, it is no longer sufficient for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in the modern era to merely present Islamic teachings in a textual and theoretical manner. Teachers must package lesson content creatively and contextually so that Islamic values are deeply understood, consciously internalized, and genuinely practiced by students in their daily lives. Innovative PAI instruction must prioritize character building through systematic, planned, and sustainable measures to create a learning process that is effective, enjoyable, and aligned with the times. This shift entails not only adopting new methods or media but also transforming the teacher's mindset about instructional management. PAI teachers must adapt their approaches, strategies, and techniques to the characteristics of their students, the school environment, and ever-changing social dynamics. Consequently, the PAI teacher's strategy for instructional innovation goes beyond merely varying methods; it represents a transformative learning process that addresses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. Through creative, contextual, and value-oriented strategies, PAI instruction aims to cultivate a generation that is faithful, knowledgeable, and morally upright capable of navigating the challenges of the times while remaining grounded in Islamic teachings. As one informant explained:

"Islamic Religious Education aims not only to transfer religious knowledge but also to shape the attitudes and culture of students. In a school context, school culture comprises the values that live and evolve within the educational environment—such as discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and religiosity. PAI teachers play a strategic role in instilling these values through instructional innovations that remain relevant to the times."

Literally, innovation signifies change or renewal aimed at improvement. In education, instructional innovation represents a deliberate effort to modernize the learning process, making it more effective and efficient. Indeed, instructional innovation is not merely an option but a necessity. Consequently, teachers must continuously enhance their professional competencies to design learning experiences that are active, creative, collaborative, and technology-driven. Through appropriate innovation, the educational process can produce students who are not only academically intelligent but also adaptable, independent, and prepared to face global challenges. Thus,

technology, along with a transformation in mindsets and educational strategies, is an integral part of instructional innovation. Teachers must foster a generation that is adaptable, creative, and globally competitive by integrating technology with educational values acting, above all, as the driving force behind this change.

Strategies of Islamic religious education teachers in learning innovation

Research findings regarding the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers to innovate instruction thereby enhancing students' understanding of school culture at the two public schools reveal both similarities and differences. However, the schools share a common goal: supporting these teachers' innovative strategies to foster students' understanding of school culture. Regarding this commitment to supporting Islamic Religious Education teachers' instructional innovations to enhance school culture, one informant stated:

"As the school principal, I convey that Islamic Religious Education teachers must align with the vision and mission of the Governor of Central Sulawesi Province specifically the principles of being 'brave and intelligent,' 'brave in communal worship' (*berjama'ah*), and 'competent in Quranic recitation' (*mengaji*). Therefore, the innovation implemented by teachers here focuses on enabling students who cannot yet recite the Quran to do so starting with the *Iqra* method; we provide *Iqra* books tailored to the specific needs of the Islamic Religious Education teachers.

The local government's program is excellent, as it strongly supports school-based learning activities particularly field practicums. The "Berani Cerdas" (Brave and Intelligent) initiative has already been implemented, though we await details for the coming year, as the field practicum component is currently under review. We view this initiative very positively, noting its impact on alums who return to the school to retrieve documents or report cards for scholarship applications. Courage and intelligence are two fundamental traits that shape human character. Courage drives a person to confront challenges, while intelligence provides the direction to ensure those actions are wise. Courage is not merely a rash act or a momentary emotional impulse; rather, it is an attitude born of sound reasoning and moral awareness. Courage guided by reason enables a person to assess situations clearly, understand risks, and consider the consequences for themselves and others. Therefore, true courage is responsible courage that aligns with ethical values, upholds the truth, and preserves humanity. As Aristotle stated: "Courage must be guided by reason. An intelligent person does not act haphazardly but considers the moral consequences of their actions. Thus, true courage is rational courage."

Courage and intelligence are two complementary pillars of leadership. Courage provides the drive to make decisions and face risks, yet without strategy and shrewdness, bold actions can devolve into recklessness. Conversely, intelligence without courage yields only plans that never materialize because of fear

of failure or hesitation to act. Effective leaders blend the courage to act with careful calculation: they are bold enough to seize opportunities while remaining attuned to the situation, weighing consequences, and choosing the most appropriate course of action. It is from this synthesis that a form of leadership emerges one that is decisive, wise, and capable of driving real change.

Mass praying commitment

Faith and knowledge are two virtues that elevate a person's standing. Faith provides a path and purpose in life, while knowledge serves as a guiding light for one's actions. A believer who possesses knowledge is not only spiritually noble but also highly beneficial to society, as their knowledge is applied for the greater good. This elevation of status encompasses not merely worldly standing, but also honor in the sight of God and respect among fellow human beings. Consequently, this serves as a powerful motivation for every Muslim to balance the strength of their faith with a diligent pursuit of knowledge, as the two together shape an individual of excellence, wisdom, and good character. A school principal articulated this concept as follows:

"The vision regarding acting in togetherness implies that, within the school, we must foster a sense of communal unity such as performing prayers on time, or ensuring that Christian students carry out their worship in designated areas. However, mass praying extends beyond acts of worship or prayer alone; it also encompasses working together collaboratively engaging in cooperation so that the desired outcomes are superior to what could be achieved by working in isolation."



Fig 1: Students performed Mass Praying

Worshipping in congregation is a vital tenet of Islam that emphasizes togetherness in both worship and social life. Congregational prayer not only yields spiritual rewards but also shapes a Muslim community characterized by discipline, unity, and mutual care. Acts of worship performed with deep awareness can strengthen the heart, soothe the soul, and foster devotion that brings the individual closer to God. When worship is performed communally, a social dimension emerges that enriches the spiritual experience: this togetherness cultivates humility, dispels arrogance, and fosters a spirit of

brotherhood. In such an atmosphere, everyone stands on equal footing regardless of status, wealth, or rank reminding us that all servants of God hold the same position before Him. Thus, worship not only fortifies an individual's inner strength but also builds a social consciousness regarding equality, empathy, and unity. Imam Al-Ghazali noted that congregational worship strengthens the heart and deepens devotion. Ultimately, worshipping together fosters humility and reminds us that all servants are equal in the sight of Allah SWT.

Holy book recitation commitment

By reading the Quran, one can strengthen one's faith, improve one's character, and adopt the Quran as a guide for worship, prayer, and social interaction. Consequently, the ability to read the Quran is essential for every Muslim, serving as a vital asset for both this life and the Hereafter. Through Quranic study sessions, individuals can not only strengthen their faith and refine their character but also use the Quran as a compass for worship and interaction with others. A teacher said that "regarding the ability to recite the Quran—a significant challenge is that many students do not recite it or lack the skill to do so, often due to their backgrounds, the community, or their home environments. Therefore, here at the school, we must initiate specific measures led by our Islamic Religious Education teachers to identify which students can recite and which cannot. Those who are most proficient should teach their peers who have not yet mastered recitation; this is what we call peer-based learning. Ultimately, the key is achieving the ability to recite "Alhamdulillah."



Fig 2: Students recited holy quran

In the context of learning the Qur'an, the goal of education is not merely to enable students to read or memorize the text, but to cultivate a deep love for the Holy Book. When teaching methods are delivered wisely, enjoyably, and aligned with students' developmental stages, the Qur'an ceases to be a burden and becomes a cherished source of inspiration and a guide for life. Through this approach, education produces a generation that is not only intellectually astute but also spiritually grounded. As Ibn Sina articulated, education must be adaptive, attentive to the students' capabilities, and capable of fostering a love for the Qur'an. Reciting the Qur'an is not simply an activity of articulating letters and maintaining the beauty of the recitation; it is also an intellectual and spiritual process that requires understanding. Reading the Qur'an with

the intellect entails striving to grasp the meanings, wisdom, and moral messages it contains, ensuring that the verses do not merely remain on the lips but permeate the mind and behavior. Rational understanding enables individuals to recognize the relevance of the Qur'an's teachings to real life, transforming it into a life guide rather than just a text recited repetitively. Thus, reading the Qur'an shapes both the intellect and the heart: the intellect is illuminated by its meanings, while the heart is moved to embody its values. Muhammad Abduh analyzed this concept by stating that studying the Qur'an is not merely about reading sacred words; it must be accompanied by rational understanding.

Conclusion

Strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers to enhance school culture include scheduling religious activities such as Quran memorization, Quran recitation, morning congregational prayers, remembrance of God, short religious lectures, and mid-day congregational prayers. The roles of the principal, vice-principals, and teachers are crucial in supporting and evaluating these strategies and the students involved. Research implications for implementing these strategies highlight several aspects: teachers mentoring students outside regular teaching hours; the application of singing and "deep learning" methods; the need for teacher training; the use of technology and contextual learning; habituation methods; and collaborative teaching involving students and their peers. The instruction covers both theory and practice and aims to revitalize the guidance provided by Islamic Religious Education teachers. Religious education in public schools encompasses enabling students to read the Quran, participate in congregational worship, and apply teachings in daily life. It also involves collaborative teaching both between teachers and students and among students themselves as well as the "Governor's Berani Cerdas" (Bold and Smart) programs and continuous motivational methods. Furthermore, the ability to read the Quran positively impacts students' peers; other elements include the use of digital tools in learning, the Independent Curriculum, habituation methods, and the dissemination of these practices.

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