

Implementation of Thematic Learning in Islamic Religious Education to Increase the Understanding of Spiritual Values of Elementary School Students

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Abstract

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in elementary schools is often taught conventionally with an emphasis on memorization, so that students' understanding of spiritual values tends to remain cognitive and has not yet been internalized into daily attitudes. This study aims to analyze the implementation of thematic learning in IRE, identify the spiritual values developed, and reveal its supporting and inhibiting factors at UPT SDN 74 Bolang, Enrekang Regency. The study used a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design, conducted from October 2025 to January 2026. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews with the principal, the IRE teacher, and homeroom teachers of grades I-VI, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model (data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing) and validated through prolonged engagement, persistence of observation, and source triangulation. The results show that thematic learning effectively connects religious teaching with students' real experiences through themes of family, social life, and responsibility, so that the values of honesty, compassion, and responsibility began to appear in students' behavior both at school and at home. Key supporting factors include teacher collaboration, flexible school policy, and parental involvement, while inhibiting factors include limited instructional time, insufficient reinforcement of values at home, and the negative influence of social media. This study contributes a contextual thematic IRE learning model suited to the socio-cultural characteristics of the Enrekang community, serving as a reference for developing similar learning in other elementary schools.

Keywords

Thematic Learning; Islamic Religious Education; Spiritual Values; Elementary School; Case Study



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INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has a strategic role as a forum for spiritual and moral guidance for students from an early age, because the learning is not solely oriented to

the transfer of religious knowledge, but to internalize spiritual values into students' daily lives. An innovative and integrative learning approach is an urgent need so that PAI material can be understood deeply and applicatively by elementary school students, considering that conventional learning that is teacher-centered and emphasizes mere memorization tends to produce a superficial religious understanding that is not internalized in students' attitudes and behaviors.

Thematic learning is present as a relevant approach to integrate PAI's spiritual values with various aspects of students' lives, so that religious concepts are understood holistically and contextually, rather than partially, (Kurniawan, 2021; Magdalena et al., 2023). Through themes that are close to the student experience, teachers can meaningfully package the values of faith, honesty, responsibility, and compassion, while developing students' critical, creative, and reflective thinking skills from an Islamic spiritual perspective (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). The characteristics of thematic learning that are student-centered, provide hands-on experience, are flexible, and present cross-subject concepts make it relevant to be applied at the elementary school level which is cognitively still in the concrete operational stage (Prastowo, 2020; Suryani et al., 2025). This approach is in line with the Guidelines for the Preparation of Thematic Learning for Islamic Religious Education in Elementary Schools which emphasizes that thematic learning makes it easier for students to understand the material in depth while saving learning time through the incorporation of various topics in one theme (Drafting Team of the Directorate of Islamic Religious Education, 2009).

The theological foundation of thematic learning in PAI can be traced in QS. Al-'Alaq/96:1-5 which commands humans to read and learn as a form of worship, as well as QS. An-Nahl/16:125 which teaches da'wah methods and learning with wisdom and good ways (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024). Adawiah and Robbaniyah (2024) in the study of Ibn Katherine's tafsir emphasized that the command of iqra' in Surah Al-'Alaq has a broad meaning, including the reading of the kauniyah verse (natural phenomena) and the qauliyah verse (the Qur'an), which is in line with the spirit of thematic learning that integrates various aspects of knowledge. The hadith narrated by Ibn Majah also emphasizes the obligation to study for every Muslim without age limit (Ibn Majah, 2009), which strengthens the urgency of in-depth PAI learning from the basic education level.

Juridically, the implementation of thematic learning gains legitimacy from Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System which mandates the development of students to become human beings of faith, piety, and noble character (Fauzan, Rozak, & Nurdin, 2024; Ashari, 2024), as well as Government Regulation Number 57 of 2021 concerning National Education Standards which emphasizes the integration of spiritual, social, knowledge, and skill competencies in one learning approach (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021). Theoretically, PAI thematic learning is also based on constructivism theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is built by students through experience and interaction with the

environment (Suparman, 2023), as well as the theory of multiple intelligence, which emphasizes the importance of accommodating students' spiritual-existential intelligence through varied and integrative learning activities (Gardner, 2024).

The learning conditions of PAI at UPT SDN 74 Bolang, Enrekang Regency show that the lecture method still dominates the learning process, with a limited time allocation, namely 3-4 hours of lessons per week, so that students tend to be passive and their understanding of spiritual values is memorized without real application. The researchers' initial observations in September-November 2025 found a gap between the religious knowledge possessed by students and the practice of worship and daily morals, such as dishonest behavior, lack of discipline in worship, and low social concern. PAI teachers at the school also acknowledged the limitations in designing integrative thematic learning due to the lack of specific training on this approach.

Several previous studies have examined topics related to this research. Lidya Putri et al. (2023) found that the implementation of PAI in shaping students' spirituality runs through classroom learning, religious extracurriculars, and worship habits, but has not highlighted specific learning methods. Asih (2023) reveals that religious values are built through the habituation of polite and mutual respect, without emphasis on thematic approaches. Ali Firdaus (2023) examines digital-based PAI learning strategies for learning motivation, with a different focus on internalizing spiritual values through a thematic approach. Sofiasyari (2020) and Hikmawati (2018) examine character-based thematic learning in general across subjects, without focusing on PAI or the local socio-cultural context of Enrekang Regency. Based on this mapping, this research has novelty in the exploration of the PAI's thematic-integrative learning model which is specifically developed in the socio-cultural context of the people of Enrekang, South Sulawesi, while placing the understanding of spiritual values as an indicator of measurable and evaluable success.

The issue of the formation of students' spiritual character through religious learning is also relevant to the broader challenges of national education, where strengthening character education is one of the priorities of basic education policies in Indonesia. The phenomenon of declining social sensitivity, increasing bullying, and weak academic honesty among elementary school students that have been widely reported in recent years show that religious learning that is only cognitively oriented has not been able to adequately answer these problems. In this context, the PAI thematic learning model developed and tested in educational units with characteristics of rural religious communities such as UPT SDN 74 Bolang is important to be studied, because it has the potential to be a reference for other schools with similar socio-cultural characteristics in various regions of Indonesia, especially in the South Sulawesi region which historically has a strong Islamic tradition and local wisdom of Bugis-Makassar.

Based on the description above, this study aims to: (1) analyze the implementation of thematic learning in PAI to improve the understanding of students' spiritual values at UPT SDN 74 Bolang, Enrekang Regency; (2) identify the spiritual values that develop in students;

and (3) reveal the supporting and inhibiting factors for the implementation of thematic learning. The results of the research are expected to make practical contributions for PAI teachers in designing integrative and meaningful learning, as well as theoretical contributions to the development of theme-based PAI learning methodologies in elementary schools, especially in the context of rural religious communities.

Thematic learning is one of the integrated learning models that allows students, both individually and in groups, to actively explore and discover concepts in a holistic, meaningful, and authentic manner (Kurniawan, 2021). Thematic learning is interpreted as learning that is designed based on a certain theme, which is then reviewed from various subjects, so that students do not study the material separately, but as a learning unit tied by a theme (Magdalena et al., 2023). This approach differs qualitatively from conventional learning because of its nature that guides students to achieve higher order thinking through multiple intelligence optimization, while simultaneously developing attitudes, skills, and knowledge (Gardner, 2024).

The characteristics of thematic learning include five main aspects, namely: (1) student-centered, where the teacher plays the role of facilitator; (2) provide direct experiences that expose students to something concrete; (3) the separation between subjects is not so clear, because the focus of learning is directed to the topics closest to students' lives; (4) presenting concepts from various subjects at once; and (5) flexible, because teachers can connect teaching materials in one subject with other subjects as well as with student life and the school environment (Prastowo, 2020). These principles make thematic learning relevant to PAI, as spiritual values can be inserted naturally into a variety of themes without feeling forced or detached from the context of students' daily lives.

In the context of Islamic Religious Education, thematic learning has a special purpose, which is to make it easier for students to focus on certain topics, allow students to learn various basic skills simultaneously, deepen students' understanding of the material, develop basic competencies through personal experience in real situations, and save learning time because the material can be prepared systematically (Drafting Team of the Directorate of Islamic Religious Education, 2009). These objectives are a frame of reference in analyzing the implementation of PAI thematic learning which is the focus of this research.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive analytical type of field research (Ali, 2023; Al-Muchtar, 2023). The design used is an intrinsic case study, which is a case study that is studied in depth because of the peculiarities of the phenomenon itself, in this case the implementation of PAI thematic learning in a specific educational unit. The case study approach was chosen because this study seeks to answer the question of how and why regarding contemporary phenomena that occur in their natural context, in line with the characteristics of case studies according to Yin (2018). The research uses three paradigms at once, namely the pedagogic paradigm to understand the learning implementation process,

the theological paradigm to analyze phenomena from the perspective of religious norms and values, and the sociological paradigm to understand the social structures and processes that surround learning in schools (Soekanto, 2019).

The research was carried out at UPT SDN 74 Bolang, Alla District, Enrekang Regency, South Sulawesi, from October 2025 to January 2026. This location was chosen based on considerations of the quality of the school, the number of students, and the characteristics of the supportive socio-religious environment, as well as the absence of similar research examining the implementation of PAI thematic learning in the school. The research data sources consist of primary data obtained directly through interviews with school principals, homeroom teachers I-VI, and PAI teachers, as well as observations of the learning process in the classroom, and secondary data in the form of school documents, books, and relevant literature (Moleong, 2023; Sugiyono, 2021). The research instruments used include interview and observation guidelines, field notes, and cameras to document the research process, with the researcher acting as the main instrument (Arikunto, 2021).

Data collection techniques are carried out in three ways, namely direct or disguised observation of the learning process in the classroom, in-depth interviews with all informants, and documentation in the form of archives and photos of learning activities (Sudaryono, 2019). A summary of the profile of the research informant is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informant Profile

Yes	They report	Position/Role	Interview Focus
1	Principal	Leaders of educational units	School policies and support
2	Good Teacher	PAI subject instructor	Thematic learning strategies and implementation
3	Guardian Class III	Low-class builder	Thematic application to the lower class
4	Homeroom Teacher Class IV	Mid-range builder	Thematic application and thematic linkage
5	Homeroom Class V	Mid-range builder	Effectiveness of thematic learning
6	Class VI Homeroom Teacher	High-class builder	The impact of learning on student behavior

Data analysis follows Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn/verification cyclically from the time data collection takes place until the data reaches the saturation point (Sugiyono, 2021). The data reduction stage is carried out by summarizing and focusing the data on the main things related to the implementation of thematic learning, spiritual values, and support-inhibiting factors, so that the collected data can be clearly described. The data is then presented in the

form of narrative descriptions and tables so that the patterns are easy to understand, before finally drawing conclusions that answer the formulation of the research problem, while remaining open to the possibility of developing new findings during the research process.

The case study analysis is complemented by pattern matching techniques and explanation building as suggested by Yin (2018), which compares empirical findings with theoretical propositions regarding thematic learning and internalization of spiritual values. The validity of the data was tested in three ways, namely extending observations by returning to the field to ensure data consistency, increasing diligence through more careful and continuous observation, and triangulating sources by comparing the results of interviews between informants and the results of observations and documentation (Moleong, 2023). These three techniques are used simultaneously to ensure that the research findings truly reflect the conditions of implementation of PAI thematic learning at the research site, rather than just a single perception from a single data source.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of Thematic Learning in Islamic Religious Education

The profile of UPT SDN 74 Bolang shows that this school has a state status with B accreditation, led by a principal and supported by twelve educators and 93 students spread across six study groups. This condition is the context for the implementation of thematic learning in PAI which is the focus of the research. The results of interviews with principals, PAI teachers, and homeroom teachers showed a consistent perception that thematic learning is seen as effective in helping students understand spiritual values, because the teaching materials are not presented separately, but are directly linked to students' life experiences. The PAI teacher explained that the relationship between the theory of religious teachings and the practice of daily life makes students' understanding not stop at the cognitive level, but also applied in real actions. The third class homeroom teacher gave an example of the application of the theme "Family" which is associated with the value of affection in Islam, while the fifth grade homeroom teacher associated the theme "Social" with the value of sharing and helping. Teachers at the high grade level (V and VI) consider that the connection of the theme with students' personal experiences strengthens their understanding and increases their activeness in learning.

In general, these findings confirm that thematic learning at UPT SDN 74 Bolang is carried out by associating curricular themes, such as family, environment, and social care, with relevant religious values, so that students gain a more concrete and applicable understanding compared to conventional PAI learning which is lecture and memorization only. Table 2 presents the distribution of UPT SDN 74 Bolang students by class and gender, who are the beneficiaries of the implementation of PAI thematic learning in this study. This distribution shows that the implementation of PAI thematic learning reaches all levels of grades I to VI, with different characteristics of cognitive and social development at each

level, so that the strategy of conveying themes and spiritual values is also adjusted by each homeroom teacher.

Table 2. Distribution of UPT Students SDN 74 Bolang

No	Classes	Male	Women	Quantity
1	I	8	10	18
2	II	6	8	14
3	III	8	8	16
4	IV	8	10	18
5	V	9	7	16
6	VI	5	6	11
	Quantity	44	49	93

In terms of educators, the implementation of PAI thematic learning is supported by twelve teachers and education personnel with diverse employment statuses, including Civil Servants (PNS), Government Employees with Employment Agreements (PPPK), and school honorary staff. PAI teachers at this school have PPPK status and support religious learning for all grade levels, while the integration of spiritual values in learning themes also involves homeroom teachers in grades I to VI as partners in designing and implementing thematic learning collaboratively. This collaboration between PAI teachers and homeroom teachers is one of the keys to the successful implementation of thematic learning in this school, as will be further described in the supporting and inhibiting factors section.

Operationally, the thematic learning cycle of PAI in this school begins with the determination of weekly or monthly themes that refer to the national thematic curriculum, such as the themes of family, environment, social care, and independence. PAI teachers and homeroom teachers then collaboratively identify spiritual values relevant to the theme, before designing learning activities in the form of group discussions, reflective assignments, or simple social projects that allow students to practice the values learned. At the evaluation stage, the teacher observes changes in students' attitudes in the classroom and parents' reports about students' behavior at home, so that the assessment of spiritual value understanding does not only rely on cognitive aspects through questions and answers, but also on affective and psychomotor aspects observed in students' daily lives. This kind of cycle illustrates that PAI thematic learning at UPT SDN 74 Bolang has moved beyond just delivering material, towards the formation of sustainable spiritual habits and character.

Spiritual Values in Students

The results of the study identified that the spiritual values developed through PAI thematic learning at UPT SDN 74 Bolang include honesty, compassion, peace, justice, responsibility, and gratitude, which are consistently mentioned by all informants as the basic

values that shape students' morals. Teachers and homeroom teachers agree that these values are important to be taught not only in the context of ritual worship, but also in the way students interact with others and face life's problems.

The six grades have a slightly different emphasis at each grade level. In the lower class (I-III), value instilling is more done through simple habits, such as greeting, being polite, and sharing with friends, while in the higher class (IV-VI) value instilling is expanded through reflective discussions and social projects that demand more independent student initiative and responsibility. The value of honesty is emphasized especially in the academic context, such as not cheating during exams and openly admitting mistakes, while the values of compassion and social care are often manifested through activities of helping friends and sharing with others. The value of responsibility is associated with consistency in completing tasks, while gratitude and awareness of connection with Allah Swt. are grown through reflection on students' daily blessings and experiences, including concern for the cleanliness and sustainability of the school environment.

The introduction of spiritual values is carried out through a variety of methods, namely a narrative approach based on the stories of the Prophet and Islamic figures, group discussions, social projects such as donation collection, personal reflection activities, and role-playing simulations. The diversity of this method shows that teachers try to adapt the value recognition strategy to the characteristics of student development at each grade level. Positive behavioral changes were observed in students after participating in spiritual value learning, including increased mutual respect, empathy for friends who are struggling, honesty in doing assignments and exams, concern for environmental cleanliness, and responsibility in completing obligations. However, the application of these values has not been completely consistent. The main challenges reported by all informants are the weak strengthening of spiritual values in the family environment, the influence of peer association, and exposure to social media content that often contradicts the religious values taught in schools.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors for the Implementation of Thematic Learning

The results of the interviews revealed that the main supporting factors for the implementation of PAI thematic learning include good cooperation between PAI teachers and homeroom teachers in designing integrated materials, principals' policies that give teachers the freedom to innovate, active involvement of students, the provision of facilities such as projectors, computers, and internet access, and parental support in strengthening the values taught in schools. The availability of varied learning media, such as videos, images, and digital applications, has also been reported to increase student engagement and understanding.

On the other hand, the most frequently mentioned inhibiting factor is the limited allocation of PAI learning time, which is only 3-4 hours per week, which makes it difficult for teachers to discuss the relationship between themes and spiritual values in depth. Another

difficulty is that not all curricular themes are easily associated with religious values, especially those that are technical or practical skills, thus demanding extra creativity from teachers. In addition, the diversity of students' family backgrounds and the lack of support to strengthen religious values at home are also systemic obstacles that affect the consistency of the application of spiritual values in students' daily lives.

Another inhibiting factor identified was the limited variety of religious-based media and props, although schools have provided basic facilities such as projectors, computers, and internet access. Some informants mentioned that reference books and teaching aids specifically designed to deepen spiritual values are still limited in number and variety, so teachers must take the initiative to find and create relevant learning media themselves. The tight curriculum schedule is also reported to limit the space for teachers to explore each theme thoroughly, so that some spiritual values are only conveyed at a glance without adequate reinforcement through repetition or further reflection.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the idea that thematic learning that integrates religious teachings with daily life is able to increase students' understanding of spiritual values in a more meaningful way than conventional PAI learning (Kurniawan, 2021; Prastowo, 2020). The theological foundation of QS. Al-'Alaq/96:1-5 about the command to recite and QS. An-Nahl/16:125 on the da'wah method with wisdom (Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, 2024) is relevant to the finding that students are more likely to understand spiritual values when religious teachings are conveyed through concrete experiences and not just memorization of texts. This emphasizes that the process of "reading" in a broad sense, including reading the phenomenon of students' social life, is a learning method that is in harmony with the principles of the Qur'an.

From the perspective of constructivism theory, the results of this study show that students build an understanding of spiritual values through direct experience and social interaction, as seen from the effectiveness of social project methods, group discussions, and role-playing used by teachers (Suparman, 2023). Thematic learning is a vehicle for the application of meaningful learning theory, because spiritual values are directly related to the knowledge and experience that students have had, so that the internalization process takes place more effectively than the delivery of values in an informative one-way.

Compared to the research of Lidya Putri et al. (2023) which found that the formation of student spirituality occurs through a combination of classroom learning, extracurricular, and worship habits without emphasis on certain methods, this study provides specificity to thematic approaches as pedagogical strategies that specifically connect PAI with cross-subject curricular themes. Similarly, compared to Sofiasyari (2020) and Hikmawati (2018) who examine character-based thematic learning in general, this study specifically focuses on understanding Islamic spiritual values as an indicator of measurable success, in the socio-cultural context of the religious Enrekang community.

The novelty of this research lies in the finding that PAI thematic learning not only improves students' cognitive understanding, but also has an impact on real behavioral changes, namely increased empathy, honesty, and social concern of students at school and at home. These findings enrich the study of the role of PAI in improving the spiritual intelligence of students (Djollong & Yusuf, 2017), by showing that the thematic approach is one of the concrete strategies to achieve this goal at the elementary school level.

However, this study also reveals an important gap between the ideals of thematic learning and the reality of its implementation in the field. The limited PAI learning time of only 3-4 hours per week is a structural obstacle that limits the depth of theme discussion, in line with the finding that the success of integrated thematic learning is highly dependent on the flexibility of curriculum time allocation (Marselina et al., 2025). In addition, external factors such as weak value strengthening in the family environment and the influence of social media confirm that the success of internalizing spiritual values cannot be fully imposed on schools, but requires synergy between schools, families, and communities (Lidya Putri et al., 2023).

In practical terms, these findings recommend the importance of using interactive learning media to strengthen the effectiveness of thematic learning (Naim et al., 2025), continuous training for PAI teachers in designing integrative thematic learning, and strengthening school-family partnerships to maintain consistency in the application of students' spiritual values in daily life.

The leadership role of the principal is also an important variable that stands out in this study. The policy of school principals that gives teachers the freedom to innovate, along with the provision of adequate learning facilities, is in line with the principle that the success of learning innovation at the classroom level is highly dependent on managerial support at the level of educational units. Without flexible policy support from school leaders, teachers' creativity in integrating spiritual values into learning themes will be difficult to realize sustainably, even if individual teachers have adequate motivation and competence.

Findings on the negative influence of social media and the weak strengthening of values in the family environment also need to be read in the context of broader social change. The development of information technology has changed the pattern of interaction and a source of reference for elementary school-age children, so that school is no longer the only institution that shapes students' spiritual understanding. This condition demands the strengthening of the role of the family as the main partner of the school, as emphasized by the informants in this study, so that the values built through thematic learning in the classroom are not reduced by the influence of the environment outside the school that is not always in line with religious teachings.

This research has several limitations that need to be stated honestly. First, the research was conducted on a single educational unit with an intrinsic case study approach, so the findings produced are contextual and not intended to be statistically generalized to the wider primary school population. Second, the research data is qualitative based on the

perception of informants, so it has not quantitatively measured how much the understanding of students' spiritual values has increased before and after the implementation of thematic learning. Third, the duration of the study of four months allows for the observation of short-term changes in attitudes, but it cannot ensure the sustainability of internalizing spiritual values in the long term. These limitations open up space for further research that is quantitative, longitudinal, or multisite in nature to strengthen the generalization of findings regarding the effectiveness of PAI thematic learning in improving the understanding of spiritual values of elementary school students.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, three main things can be concluded. First, the implementation of thematic learning in PAI at UPT SDN 74 Bolang, Enrekang Regency is effective in increasing students' understanding of spiritual values by directly linking religious teachings to daily life through the themes of family, social, and responsibility, which are applied through discussions, social projects, and reflective tasks, although time constraints and inconsistent external support are still obstacles. Second, spiritual values such as honesty, compassion, and responsibility are successfully formed through this approach and begin to show in changes in students' behavior, although the consistency of their application is still influenced by weak family support, peer influence, and social media. Third, the successful implementation of thematic learning is supported by cooperation between teachers, flexible school policies, and parental involvement, while the main inhibiting factors are time constraints in the curriculum schedule and the negative influence of the external environment.

This study recommends that PAI teachers continue to develop creativity in integrating learning themes with spiritual values through interactive media; homeroom teachers strengthen communication with parents to involve families in strengthening values; the principal provides ongoing training and flexibility in curriculum time allocation; and parents play an active role in discussing and exemplifying spiritual values at home. Further research is suggested to develop an evaluation model to measure the effectiveness of PAI thematic learning in a more measurable manner, as well as to expand the scope of research to other educational units with different socio-cultural characteristics to test the generalization of these findings.

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