

OPTIMIZING ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHERS' STRATEGIES TO INCREASE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH GROUP DISCUSSION AT SMP NEGERI 1 PONOROGO

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Abstract :

Student engagement is an essential factor in achieving effective learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education, yet some students remain reluctant to ask questions, participate in discussions, and express their opinions. This study aims to analyze the optimization of Islamic Religious Education teachers' strategies in increasing student engagement through group discussion at SMP Negeri 1 Ponorogo. The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation and analyzed through data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and triangulation. The findings indicate that teachers optimized group discussion through systematic planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning activities. The strategy increased students' active participation, particularly in asking questions, expressing opinions, responding to peers' ideas, and collaborating within groups. Its implementation was supported by teacher preparedness, varied instructional methods, and student enthusiasm, while limited instructional time, differences in student characteristics, and low self confidence among some students constrained participation. These findings imply that well planned and adaptive group discussion can serve as a practical strategy for strengthening student engagement and participatory learning in Islamic Religious Education.

Keywords : Islamic Religious Education Strategies; Group Discussion; Student Engagement; Student Participation; Islamic Religious Education Teachers

Abstrak :

Keaktifan siswa merupakan salah satu faktor penting dalam mencapai pembelajaran Pendidikan Agama Islam yang efektif, tetapi sebagian siswa masih kurang berani bertanya, berdiskusi, dan menyampaikan pendapat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis optimalisasi strategi guru Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam meningkatkan keaktifan siswa melalui metode diskusi kelompok di SMP Negeri 1 Ponorogo. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian deskriptif, sedangkan data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi serta dianalisis melalui reduksi data, penyajian data, penarikan kesimpulan, dan triangulasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru mengoptimalkan metode diskusi kelompok melalui perencanaan, pelaksanaan, dan evaluasi pembelajaran secara sistematis. Strategi tersebut meningkatkan keaktifan siswa, terutama dalam bertanya, mengemukakan pendapat, memberikan tanggapan terhadap gagasan teman, dan bekerja sama dalam kelompok. Pelaksanaannya didukung oleh kesiapan guru, variasi metode pembelajaran, dan antusiasme siswa, sedangkan keterbatasan waktu, perbedaan karakteristik siswa, serta rendahnya kepercayaan diri sebagian siswa menjadi kendala. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa diskusi kelompok yang terencana dan adaptif dapat menjadi strategi praktis untuk memperkuat keaktifan dan pembelajaran partisipatif dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam.

Kata Kunci: Strategi Pendidikan Agama Islam; Diskusi Kelompok; Keaktifan Siswa; Partisipasi

INTRODUCTION

Moral Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has a strategic role in developing students' religious knowledge, attitudes, and social competencies. Its effectiveness, however, depends not only on the delivery of subject matter but also on students' active engagement in learning activities. Active participation enables students to formulate questions, exchange ideas, construct arguments, collaborate with peers, and relate religious concepts to everyday situations. Recent studies emphasize that active learning in IRE can create more dynamic and interactive classroom environments while supporting students' conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and application of religious values (Nafiah et al., 2024). Consequently, teachers need to move beyond a predominantly information transmission role and design learning experiences that position students as active participants.

Student passivity remains a significant challenge in implementing participatory IRE learning. Students may hesitate to ask questions, express opinions, or respond to their peers because of limited confidence, differences in ability, or classroom conditions that do not sufficiently encourage participation. These challenges indicate that student engagement cannot be separated from the teacher's instructional strategy and classroom management. Recent research on IRE learning similarly identifies teacher readiness, student characteristics, and learning conditions as important factors influencing the success of active learning (Nafiah et al., 2024). Thus, improving student activity requires more than simply selecting an interactive method it requires teachers to optimize the way the method is planned, facilitated, and evaluated.

Group discussion provides a relevant pedagogical alternative because it distributes learning participation among students and creates opportunities for dialogue, argumentation, cooperation, and peer learning. Empirical research supports this potential. Pebilasari and Yunita (2023) found a significant relationship between discussion methods and students' learning activity in Islamic Religious Education, while Lubis (2023) reported that discussion based IRE learning supported students' critical thinking skills but also revealed unequal participation among learners. These findings suggest that discussion can stimulate active learning, but its effectiveness depends on how teachers structure interaction and involve less active students. The method therefore needs to be

understood not merely as a classroom technique but as a teacher-mediated strategy for creating meaningful participation.

Other studies reinforce the importance of teacher intervention in active learning. Mahfudi et al. (2023) examined Islamic Religious Education teachers' strategies for increasing student activity and demonstrated the relevance of teacher planning and classroom management in encouraging participation. Meanwhile, Nafiah et al. (2024) showed that active-learning approaches can strengthen student participation, conceptual understanding, and social skills, although differences in student ability and teacher readiness may limit implementation. More recently, Syarif et al. (2026) specifically examined teachers' efforts to optimize discussion methods and found that small group organization, opportunities to express opinions, teacher guidance, teacher preparedness, student enthusiasm, and a supportive classroom environment contributed to participation, whereas unequal abilities, low confidence, and limited time remained obstacles.

Although these studies establish that discussion and active-learning strategies can enhance student participation, an important gap remains. Quantitative studies have primarily examined the relationship or effect of discussion methods on learning activity, while qualitative studies have tended to describe the implementation of active learning or teacher strategies in broader terms. Less attention has been given to the optimization process through which an Islamic Religious Education teacher plans, facilitates, monitors, and evaluates group discussions specifically to increase students' active participation at the junior-secondary level. The present study addresses this gap by examining teacher strategy as an integrated process rather than treating group discussion as an isolated instructional method. This focus also enables the study to identify both enabling conditions and practical constraints that shape students' participation during IRE learning.

Accordingly, this study investigates how Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Ponorogo optimize their instructional strategies to increase student engagement through group discussion. Specifically, it examines the planning, implementation, and evaluation of group discussion and identifies the forms of student activity that emerge as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing its implementation. The study contributes a contextual account of how teacher mediated group discussion can be organized to encourage questioning, expressing opinions, responding to peers, and

collaborative learning in junior secondary Islamic Religious Education. By connecting teacher strategy with observable forms of participation, the study seeks to provide practical implications for developing more student centered and participatory IRE instruction.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the optimization of Islamic Religious Education teachers' strategies in increasing student engagement through group discussion. The approach was selected to capture instructional practices and participant perspectives within their natural classroom context. The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Ponorogo during the 2025/2026 academic year. Participants comprised Islamic Religious Education teachers, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and seventh grade students involved in group discussion-based learning. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement and relevant knowledge of the research focus (Nafiah et al., 2024; Wibowo et al., 2024).

Data were collected through classroom observation, in depth interviews, and documentation. Observation focused on student participation and teacher strategies during group discussions, while interviews addressed lesson planning, implementation, evaluation, and supporting and inhibiting factors. Documentation included instructional materials, learning records, photographs, and other relevant school documents. Data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, comprising data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data credibility was established through source and technique triangulation by comparing information obtained from teachers, the vice principal, students, observations, interviews, and documents (Wibowo et al., 2024; Syarif et al., 2026).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Optimizing Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Strategies through Group Discussion

The findings demonstrate that optimizing group discussion at SMP Negeri 1 Ponorogo begins with deliberate instructional planning rather than with the discussion activity itself. The Islamic Religious Education teacher prepares teaching modules, formulates learning objectives, selects topics that are appropriate for collaborative inquiry, and forms heterogeneous groups to distribute participation more evenly. During implementation, the teacher

introduces the topic and discussion rules, facilitates group interaction, provides guidance to students who encounter difficulties, and encourages students to ask questions and express their views. Group presentations are followed by responses from other students and teacher clarification. At the evaluation stage, the teacher assesses not only students' understanding but also participation, cooperation, and communication. This finding is consistent with Mahfudi et al. (2023), who found that discussion can stimulate multiple dimensions of student activity in Islamic Religious Education, including visual, oral, listening, writing, mental, and emotional activity. It also corresponds with Supriatna et al. (2024), who identified planning, implementation, and assessment as interconnected components of active learning in Islamic Religious Education. However, the present study extends these findings by demonstrating that optimization depends on the teacher's continuous orchestration of the discussion rather than simply on the adoption of the discussion method. The contribution of this finding is therefore a teacher-mediated model in which planning, facilitation, and evaluation operate as an integrated mechanism for generating student participation.

Group Discussion as a Mechanism for Expanding Student Participation

The increased student activity observed in this study was reflected in several concrete forms of participation students became more willing to ask questions, answer the teacher, express opinions, respond to peers' presentations, search for relevant information, complete group tasks, and collaborate in formulating discussion results. Participation therefore extended beyond verbal responses and included cognitive and collaborative engagement. This pattern supports the conception of active learning in Islamic Religious Education as learning that requires students to participate directly rather than merely receive information from the teacher (Nafiah et al., 2024). It is also strongly aligned with Musakal et al. (2024), whose qualitative study found that discussion can increase student participation in Islamic Religious Education, and with Kodar and Hilaiyah (2024), who reported that group discussion encouraged students to exchange ideas, collaborate, and become actively involved in learning. Nevertheless, the Ponorogo findings add an important qualification discussion does not automatically make every student equally active. Participation becomes more evenly distributed when the teacher intentionally creates opportunities for quieter students, monitors group interaction, and prevents more confident students from dominating. Thus, the novelty lies in identifying teacher

facilitation as the mediating condition that converts group discussion from a structural arrangement into a genuinely participatory learning environment.

Teacher Facilitation and the Transformation from Teacher Centered to Student Centered Learning

The findings further indicate a shift in the teacher's position from primary information provider to facilitator, moderator, motivator, and evaluator. Instead of controlling the entire flow of classroom communication, the teacher provides students with space to construct explanations, negotiate different opinions, and present collective conclusions. This shift is important because student-centered learning is not achieved simply by placing students in groups; it requires instructional structures that give them meaningful responsibility for the learning process. Supriatna et al. (2024) similarly found that active learning in Islamic Religious Education through discussion, debate, and presentation created a more interactive learning environment and encouraged students to become more proactive. Mahfudi et al. (2023) likewise showed that discussion could stimulate oral, mental, emotional, and other forms of activity that were less apparent in conventional instruction. The present study extends this literature by showing that teacher facilitation remains essential even within a student-centered classroom. The teacher does not disappear from the learning process instead, the teacher's role changes from controlling communication to designing and regulating participation. This finding contributes to a more nuanced understanding of student-centered Islamic Religious Education in which teacher guidance and student autonomy are complementary rather than contradictory.

Supporting and Inhibiting Conditions in Optimizing Group Discussion

The effectiveness of group discussion at SMP Negeri 1 Ponorogo was shaped by both enabling and constraining conditions. Teacher preparedness, appropriate selection of learning methods, adequate learning facilities, school support, and student enthusiasm facilitated implementation, whereas limited instructional time, heterogeneous student abilities, and low confidence among some students restricted equal participation. The teacher responded through encouragement, continuous assistance during group work, equitable opportunities to speak, more effective time management, and appreciation for active participation. These findings are consistent with Nafiah et al. (2024), who identified time allocation and student participation as important considerations in active learning, and with Musakal et al. (2024), whose study demonstrates that discussion effectiveness is closely related to how learning is organized and

facilitated. The findings also complement Syarif et al. (2026), who reported that teacher preparedness, student enthusiasm, group organization, and teacher guidance support discussion based participation, while differences in student ability, low confidence, and limited time constitute obstacles. A distinctive contribution of the present study is the finding that these barriers should not be treated as reasons to abandon discussion instead, they become variables requiring adaptive teacher management. Thus, the success of group discussion is better understood as the result of an interaction between method, teacher competence, classroom conditions, and student characteristics rather than as an automatic consequence of using a particular instructional method.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Ponorogo optimize group discussion through systematic planning, facilitation, and evaluation to increase student engagement in learning. Theoretically, the findings reinforce the view that the effectiveness of group discussion depends not only on the method itself but also on teachers' capacity to structure interaction, facilitate equitable participation, provide motivation, and adapt classroom management to students' diverse characteristics. Practically, the study demonstrates that group discussion can strengthen students' willingness to ask questions, express opinions, respond to peers, and collaborate when supported by teacher preparedness, a conducive learning environment, and continuous guidance. The study is limited to a single school and a specific group of participants, which may constrain the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Future research should examine similar teacher-facilitated discussion strategies across multiple junior-secondary schools to compare how different classroom conditions and student characteristics influence active participation in Islamic Religious Education.

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