

## Teaching at the Right Level Approach for Autistic Children in Islamic Religious Education in Inclusive Classrooms

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### *Abstract*

The purpose of this study is to analyze the extent to which the TaRL approach can be adapted in PAI learning practices that are responsive to the unique needs of children on the autism spectrum. This study uses a qualitative method with a field research design. Data were collected through direct observation of learning activities in inclusive classes, in-depth interviews with PAI teachers, special assistant teachers (GPK), and parents of autistic students, and analysis of learning documents. The results show that the TaRL approach, which emphasizes learning based on students' actual ability levels, can be implemented effectively through differentiated instructional strategies, the use of visual media based on religious values, and collaborative support between teachers, parents, and the school environment.

**Keywords:** Autism; Differentiated instructional Strategies; inclusive classroom; Islamic Religious Education.

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### *Abstrak*

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk menganalisis sejauh mana pendekatan TaRL dapat diadaptasi dalam praktik pembelajaran PAI yang responsif terhadap kebutuhan khas anak dengan spektrum autisme. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan desain penelitian lapangan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi langsung kegiatan pembelajaran di kelas inklusif, wawancara mendalam

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dengan guru PAI, guru pendamping khusus (GPK), dan orang tua siswa autisme, serta analisis dokumen pembelajaran. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan TaRL, yang tekanan pembelajaran berbasis tingkat kemampuan aktual siswa, dapat diimplementasikan secara efektif melalui diferensiasi strategi instruksional, penggunaan media visual berbasis nilai-nilai keagamaan, serta dukungan kolaboratif antara guru, orang tua, dan lingkungan sekolah.

**Kata Kunci:** Autisme; Kelas Inklusif; Pendidikan Agama Islam; Strategi Pembelajaran Diferensial.

### A. Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in inclusive classrooms presents complex challenges, particularly in addressing the unique learning profiles of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Although PAI aims to foster moral character and spiritual growth, its implementation for autistic students often relies on conventional approaches that are less adaptive to their cognitive, communicative, and sensory needs (Hakiman et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that children with ASD have difficulty understanding abstract religious concepts, experience difficulties in reciprocal communication, and require multisensory and individualized learning strategies to participate meaningfully in religious education

(Sullivan & Aramini, 2019) (Zakirova-Engstrand et al., 2020). Academics further emphasize that the effectiveness of religious learning for autistic children depends on collaborative support from teachers and families, flexible pedagogical adjustments, and the creation of a responsive learning environment (Fong et al., 2021) (Smith et al., 2023).

In Fong et al.'s (2021) study, families of autistic children emphasized the importance of informal support and adaptation of the educational environment as determining factors in building resilience and child development (Fong dkk., 2021). This support includes collaboration between parents and teachers, as well as flexible and responsive learning strategies. This aligns with findings by Smith et al.

(2023), who revealed that immigrant families with autistic children often struggle to build meaningful collaborative relationships with educational institutions due to a lack of pedagogical understanding and school adaptations (Smith dkk., 2023)

One approach considered effective in addressing these challenges is Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL). TaRL is an approach that focuses not on a student's chronological age or formal grade level, but rather on the student's actual ability level. The Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach offers a promising framework because it shifts the focus of instruction from grade-level expectations to students' actual abilities, enabling differentiated, ability-based learning that aligns with the unique strengths and developmental rhythms of autistic learners (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016)(Sakarneh et al., 2023). This strategy encourages ongoing formative assessment, small group learning based on ability level, and the use of functionally relevant materials (Sakarneh dkk., 2023) . In the context of autistic children, this approach has great potential because it provides a

personalized learning space that suits the child's unique rhythm, interests, and strengths (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016).

The implementation of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning for children with autism has not been widely studied in depth in Indonesian literature. Most previous studies have focused on general strategies for religious learning for children with special needs without elaborating on a truly ability-based approach. For example, a study by Kistoro et al. (2020) entitled "Implementation of Islamic religious learning strategies in children with autism in Indonesia; [Primena islamskih religijskih strategija učenja kod dece sa autizmom u Indoneziji]" explores the use of picture stories and a thematic approach in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning for children with autism, but does not emphasize the importance of initial assessment and learning adjustments based on students' competency levels (Kistoro et al., 2020). Similarly, Hakiman et al. (2021) "Religious Learning Strategies in

Children with Autism in Indonesia" Highlighting the practice of religious instruction in inclusive elementary schools, however, it has not integrated the concept of adaptive pedagogy based on individual assessment as emphasized in the TaRL approach (Hakiman et al., 2021). Meanwhile, (Bilecik, 2019) in "Religious Instruction for Students with Autism in an Inclusive Primary School" emphasizes curricular and philosophical debates about the feasibility of religious education for autistic children but does not yet present applicable implementation strategies in the classroom. Even other studies such as (Sullivan & Aramini, 2019) "Religion and positive youth development: Challenges for children and youth with autism spectrum disorder" (Norris, 2023) "How does my student learn? Neurodiversity and the nature of learning in autism" and (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016) highlight more general challenges and principles of neurodiversity in learning for children with autism without directing pedagogical design based on ability levels, while international studies such as, (Zakirova-Engstrand et al., 2020)

"Culturally diverse families of young children with ASD in Sweden: Parental explanatory models" (Smith et al., 2023) 'Somali parents feel like they're on the outside': Somali mothers' experiences of parent teacher relationships for their autistic children" and (Fong et al., 2021) "Satisfaction with informal supports predicts resilience in families of children with autism spectrum disorder" focuses more on family perspectives and social relationships than on concrete instructional strategies.

This article aims to fill this gap by examining how the TaRL approach can be effectively adapted to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning for autistic children in inclusive classrooms. This study not only explains the theoretical and empirical foundations of the TaRL approach but also critically examines its implementation strategies, such as instructional differentiation, the use of visual-religious media, and collaboration between educational elements (teachers, parents, and the community). The TaRL approach allows for a more accurate mapping of

children's spiritual understanding and offers concrete solutions to religious learning practices that have historically been uniform and less responsive to neurodiversity.

This article's scholarly contribution lies in the integration of the contemporary pedagogical approach (TaRL) and Islamic religious learning practices in an inclusive context. The novelty of this study lies in exploring the specific application of TaRL in the context of Islamic Religious Education for autistic children, which to date remains very limited in national and international literature. This article also develops a new conceptual framework that incorporates the principles of differentiation, multisensory engagement, and experiential spirituality in Islamic religious learning for autistic children.

Therefore, this research is expected to provide a new direction for the development of a religious education curriculum that is more responsive to the needs of children with special needs, contribute to the design of professional teacher training based on inclusive practices, and encourage

the transformation of classroom practices towards a more just and equitable education system for all children, without exception.

## **B. Methods**

This research aims to explore in depth the application of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach in the learning of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) for autistic children in inclusive classes. Specifically, this study formulates the following research question: *How can TaRL pedagogical strategies be adapted in PAI learning to address the typical needs of children with the autism spectrum in inclusive primary schools?* This central question serves as a foundation for investigating the intersection between ability-based learning strategies and religious education that is responsive to neurodiversity.

This research adopts a qualitative approach with a field research method, allowing the researcher to directly observe, interact with, and understand the real dynamics of inclusive classroom practices. The study is conducted in several inclusive

elementary schools that implement Islamic Religious Education for autistic students, with a purposive selection of schools known to apply or explore differentiated learning strategies.

Data collection was carried out through a combination of observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis. The researcher conducted classroom observations focusing on how teachers apply TaRL principles such as grouping by ability level, use of visual supports, and task differentiation in PAI lessons. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, including PAI teachers, special education teachers, school principals, and parents of autistic students, to obtain comprehensive perspectives on learning adaptation, student engagement, and pedagogical challenges. Supporting documents such as lesson plans, individualized education programs (IEPs), and student assessment records were also reviewed.

The criteria for participant selection included: (1) PAI teachers who have taught autistic students in inclusive settings for at least one academic year; (2) schools that formally

implement inclusive education models at the elementary level; and (3) willingness of participants to engage in interviews and allow classroom observations.

The data analysis technique used in this study is thematic analysis, which involves several stages: initial coding of field notes and interview transcripts to identify key ideas related to TaRL practices; development of thematic maps that illustrate the connection between pedagogical strategies and the learning characteristics of autistic children cognitive, affective, and social; and synthesis of findings into practical recommendations for inclusive PAI learning design.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, this study applied data triangulation by comparing data from different sources and methods interviews, observations, and documents. Member checking was also used, where selected participants were invited to review the researcher's interpretations to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness.

Through this field research approach, the study is expected to

contribute significantly to the development of inclusive Islamic religious education practices, especially by offering empirical insights into the contextual application of the Teaching at the Right Level approach for autistic learners. The results of this study may also provide a foundation for future curriculum development, teacher training programs, and inclusive education policy formulation.

### **C. Results and Discussion**

#### **Characteristics of Autistic Children in the Context of PAI Learning**

Children with the autism spectrum (ASD) show unique characteristics that affect the learning process, including in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subjects. They tend to have limitations in social interaction, difficulties in verbal communication, as well as a special interest in repetitive activities (Norris, 2023). In the context of PAI, conventional approaches based on lectures and memorization have become less effective. In contrast, an approach that emphasizes visualization, routine, and structure can improve a child's understanding of religious concepts (Bilecik, 2019). Gunn and Delafield-

Butt (2016) show that successful religious learning for autistic children is one that accommodates the child's special interests and simplifies symbolic language into concrete form. In PAI learning, this can be realized through image media, religious narrative videos, and practical activities such as ablution and prayer (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016).

This characteristic demands a targeted and responsive learning strategy. According to Bilecik (2019), the preparation of a religious education curriculum for autistic children must consider the principle of accessibility of meaning, namely how complex religious material can be conveyed in a concrete and visual format. Abstract or symbolic language needs to be interpreted in a form that is easier to digest for children with autism spectrum disorders. Therefore, PAI teachers need to develop teaching materials that are not only informative, but also interactive and contextual, according to the level of cognitive and social development of students (Bilecik, 2019). Research by Hakiman et al. (2021) also emphasizes the importance

of using a practical approach in teaching Islamic teachings. Religious activities such as praying, reading short letters, and simulating daily worship can make it easier for autistic children to recognize religious routines and meanings in a concrete way. The use of visually and structurally designed learning media not only improves understanding, but also encourages students' active involvement in classroom activities (Hakiman et al., 2021).

On the other hand, teaching approaches that adjust to students' actual level of understanding, such as *Teaching at The Right Level (TaRL)*, have become highly relevant. TaRL does not place students based on age or level, but based on their ability level. This is especially suitable for autistic children who have non-linear cognitive development. Sakarneh et al. (2023) added that teachers who teach autistic students must have social-educational competencies, such as patience, sensitivity to children's needs, and visual communication skills (Sakarneh et al., 2023).

Furthermore, parental involvement in supporting children's religious learning is also an important factor. Fong et al. (2021) found that informal support from families strengthens children's resilience and motivation in the face of learning challenges. In other words, the synergy between teachers, parents, and schools is the main foundation in creating an inclusive and adaptive PAI learning environment for autistic children (Fong et al., 2021).

### **Basic Principles of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)**

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) is a learning approach that adjusts teaching materials to the actual level of ability of students, not based on age or formal grade level. The main principles of TaRL include:

1. Initial Diagnostic Assessment  
Assess students' basic abilities to determine the appropriate level of learning. Early diagnostic assessment is a crucial step in the *Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)* approach, especially in the context of inclusive education

for autistic children. This assessment serves to objectively identify students' initial abilities before the learning process takes place, so that teachers can group students based on their actual level of understanding, not just by class or chronological age (Apriliani et al., 2024). In practice, effective diagnostic assessments not only facilitate a more targeted and individualistic learning process, but also become the basis for the development of instructional strategies that are responsive to the specific needs of learners, including those on the autism spectrum.

In the context of children with autism, early diagnostic assessments have become even more important due to their highly varied cognitive, social, and behavioral characteristics. Norris (2023) emphasized that understanding neurodiversity is a prerequisite for designing fair and meaningful assessments. This strategy allows teachers to avoid overgeneralization and adapt

learning approaches to each child's strengths and limitations (Norris, 2023).

Furthermore, Gunn and Delafield-Butt (2016) stated that the preparation of assessments for autistic children needs to take into account limited interests and typical attention patterns, so that the assessment results reflect the actual condition of the child, not the biases of the measuring tool (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016). The research of Fong, Gardiner, and Iarocci (2021) also emphasizes the importance of informal support and family involvement in the assessment process, given that the home context can provide additional insights into children's abilities and needs that are not always apparent in the classroom environment (Fong et al., 2021).

In a study conducted by Hakiman et al. (2021) on religious learning for autistic children in inclusive schools, an initial assessment was used to map the child's capacity to understand basic religious

concepts (Hakiman et al., 2021). This approach has been proven to support the process of adapting materials that are more appropriate and meaningful. The same thing was also conveyed by Kistoro et al. (2020), who showed that the initial assessment provides direction in the selection of appropriate and effective instructional strategies, especially in teaching Islamic Religious Education (PAI) to students with special needs (Kistoro et al., 2020.) Thus, the initial diagnostic assessment cannot be seen as a mere administrative procedure, but rather as a scientific foundation in the application of the TaRL approach. Structured, contextual, and inclusive assessment practices are absolute prerequisites in creating an adaptive, effective, and dignified learning experience for all students, especially those on the autism spectrum.

## 2. Grouping Based on Level of Understanding

Dividing students into homogeneous learning groups based on assessment results. The grouping of students based on the level of understanding is an essential pedagogical strategy in the *Teaching at the Right Level* (TaRL) approach. This strategy prioritizes the principle that each child has a different learning speed and cognitive ability, so that a homogeneous age-based approach is not always effective in answering real learning needs in the classroom, especially in inclusive contexts such as Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning for children with autism. In practice, grouping is carried out after the implementation of a diagnostic assessment which aims to map the actual level of students' ability, not only based on formal grade level. The results of this assessment are the basis for dividing students into homogeneous learning groups based on similar levels of understanding, so that the learning process becomes more focused,

directed, and responsive to individual needs (Apriliani et al., 2024). This approach has been proven to be effective in improving learning outcomes, as shown in a study by Apriliani et al. (2024) which found that the application of comprehension-based grouping in PAI subjects is able to increase student engagement and academic achievement. This finding is in line with Ki Hadjar Dewantara's thinking which emphasizes the importance of *education that is in favor of children's nature*, namely by paying attention to their individual development as a whole (Faradila et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this strategy is also relevant in the context of inclusive learning, especially for children with autism. Children with autism spectrum disorder generally have highly individualistic learning patterns, with unique strengths and limitations in various cognitive and affective domains (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016). By

grouping them based on real ability, not just by age or class, teachers can design more adaptive and meaningful learning strategies.

In fact, in the context of PAI learning, this grouping provides space for teachers to apply a more directed spiritual-religious approach according to the absorption of autistic students (Kistoro et al., 2020) (Hakiman et al., 2021). This is important because most autistic children have difficulty understanding abstract and symbolic concepts, so learning that is tailored to the stage of development of their understanding will be much more effective and meaningful religiously and pedagogically (Bilecik, 2019), (Sullivan & Aramini, 2019).

Thus, grouping based on level of understanding is not only a solution to increase learning effectiveness, but also a concrete form of appreciation for the cognitive and affective diversity of students. From the perspective

of TaRL-based inclusive education, this approach is the main foundation for the creation of learning equity and equal access to essential knowledge, especially in religious education.

### 3. Concrete and Gradual Activity-Based Learning

Arrange learning activities that are in accordance with the level of ability of students. Concrete and gradual activity-based learning is a strategic approach designed to adapt the learning process to the level of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development of students, especially for autistic children in the context of Islamic religious education (PAI) in inclusive classes. This approach emphasizes the importance of preparing systematic and structured learning activities, starting from the simplest and most real stages to more complex and abstract stages, so as to accommodate the varied and distinctive learning needs of students with Autism Spectrum

Disorder (ASD) (Afroditi, 2021) (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016).

Aristotle's Aphrodite research (2021) confirms that the success of the inclusion of autistic children is highly dependent on the adaptation of concrete learning methods and adapted to their unique abilities. Learning activities that are too abstract without a concrete foundation risk causing anxiety, disorientation, and decreased motivation to learn. Therefore, the use of real media, visualization of concepts through images or digital manipulatives, and the application of consistent learning routines are important elements in supporting autistic children's understanding of PAI materials (Afroditi, 2021).

The concept of gradual learning is also in line with the principles of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach which emphasizes the importance of initial assessment to identify students' ability levels, then develop intervention strategies according to their learning

profiles. In practice, this approach avoids equalizing learning activities that are often not in accordance with the individual capacities of students, especially in the context of inclusive classes. For example, in learning the concept of divinity in PAI, teachers can start by introducing religious symbols that are easily recognizable visually, such as images of mosques or prayer mats, before moving on to the concept of monotheism verbally. This technique has been proven to be more effective in building understanding of autistic children who tend to have visual and concrete learning styles (Bilecik, 2019), (Kistoro et al., 2020). The use of assistive technology such as collaborative applications or sign language-based media can also optimize the participation and understanding of students with special needs (Zamry et al., 2024). Thus, concrete and gradual activity-based learning is not only an inclusive pedagogical strategy, but also reflects appreciation for

the cognitive diversity of students. This approach places teachers as facilitators who are sensitive to individual needs and are able to create an adaptive, meaningful, and humanistic learning environment for autistic children in PAI education.

#### 4. Progressive Evaluation

Conduct periodic assessments to monitor learning progress and adjust learning strategies (Majoko, 2023). Progressive evaluation is a strategic approach in assessing students' learning progress periodically and systematically, in order to ensure the adaptation of learning methods that suit their individual needs. In the context of inclusive learning for children on the autism spectrum, progressive evaluation serves not only as an academic measuring tool, but also as a diagnostic instrument that allows teachers to identify specific strengths and challenges faced by learners (Majoko, 2023). This evaluation process includes continuous formative

assessments, both in the form of direct observation, learning reflection, and the use of technology such as *virtual classrooms* that allow real-time monitoring of learning outcomes (Bedregal-Alpaca et al., 2020), (Zhou et al., 2025).

Research by Bedregal-Alpaca et al. (2020) emphasizes that the use of virtual classrooms can optimize formative evaluation through the provision of continuous and documented learning data, which is very relevant in supporting adaptive learning for students with special needs (Bedregal-Alpaca et al., 2020). Meanwhile, Bulut et al. (2025) showed that the frequency and scale of appropriate formative assessments significantly improved learning outcomes, especially when adjusted for neurodivergent characteristics, including autistic children (Bulut et al., 2025).

In addition, the competency-based assessment approach that emphasizes the achievement of real skills and not just summative

test results, has proven effective in encouraging meaningful, student-centered learning (Combefis & De Moffarts, 2020). In a technology-based learning environment, the use of *learning analytics* and *gamification* is also an important element in supporting student engagement and the accuracy of learning outcome evaluation. (Caballé & Clarisó, 2016)

Furthermore, in the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) for autistic children, progressive evaluation allows teachers to continue to adapt pedagogical approaches in a responsive manner, both in terms of religious content and delivery methods. This is important given the sensitivity and uniqueness of the way autistic children understand spiritual and moral concepts. (Bilecik, 2019), (Kistoro et al., 2020). Therefore, the integration of progressive evaluation in PAI learning is a crucial step in ensuring the affordability and effectiveness of

education that is truly inclusive and transformative. For autistic children, an early assessment is crucial to determine whether the child is at the stage of pre-academic, emerging literacy, or functionally independent in spiritual and moral aspects (Sullivan & Aramini, 2019).

### **Implementation of TaRL in PAI Learning**

The implementation of TaRL in PAI learning for autistic children requires an adaptive and responsive strategy to the individual needs of students. Based on the study of Kistoro et al. (2020) and Hakimian et al. (2021), some strategies that can be applied include:

1. **Visualization of Religious Materials:** Field observations at an inclusive elementary school in SDIT Bojonegoro revealed that the use of visual media such as illustrations of mosques, prayer tools (e.g., prayer mats and beads), and prayer movements significantly enhances autistic children's ability to understand abstract religious concepts. A PAI teacher explained in an interview:

*"We use simple and familiar images for them. For example, when explaining the pillars of Islam, we display pictures representing prayer, fasting, and zakat. The children become more focused and can associate the pictures with religious practices."*

This aligns with findings by Wainwright et al. (2020), who note that children with autism spectrum disorder tend to process information more effectively through visual and concrete modes of learning (Wainwright et al., 2020).

Documentation of classroom activities also shows that students exposed repeatedly to visual symbols gradually develop an increased ability to recognize religious elements. For instance, students were able to identify the Kaaba in a picture when asked about the pilgrimage. Some children also exhibited positive emotional responses when introduced to symbolic images of the Prophet (within Islamic ethical limits), reinforcing their recognition of religious figures.

Bilecik's (2019) research supports these findings by demonstrating that a visual-based approach in religious education not only increases autistic children's engagement but also gradually deepens their understanding of religious values. In this context, visuals serve not only as supplementary tools but also as pedagogical instruments aligned with the symbolic and interpretive needs of children with ASD ((Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016), (Norris, 2023).

Furthermore, interviews with parents revealed that children often brought visual materials home and used them in family religious conversations:

*"My child showed me a picture of a mosque given by the teacher and said it's a place for prayer. That helped us realize he understood the meaning of worship spaces, even in simple terms."*

This confirms insights from Brandt et al. (2023) and Dandarova-Robert et al. (2023), who highlight how children

express cognitive patterns, emotional attachments, and spiritual meanings through images (Cocco et al., 2023) Visualization also assists educators in assessing students' religious comprehension. In some classwork, children depicted their concept of God using images such as a heart, light, or a smiling figure indicating elements of *embodied cognition* in religious learning, as discussed by (Muthert & Schaap-Jonker, 2023).

From a neuropsychological perspective, Johnson et al. (2014) found that religious symbols can activate brain regions associated with spiritual meaning, contributing to emotional stability in autistic children when presented in a developmentally appropriate context (Saputro, 2024) A special education teacher noted:

*"After sessions using visual religious symbols, the students seemed calmer and were less prone to tantrums."*

Therefore, the strategy of visualizing religious content

within the TaRL framework is not only pedagogically relevant but also theologically and neurologically significant. However, its implementation demands cultural sensitivity, a deep understanding of special needs, and strong collaboration between teachers, parents, and intervention specialists. The symbols and representations used must align with Islamic values and be functionally understandable for autistic children (Zamry et al., 2024); (Zakirova-Engstrand et al., 2020); (Smith et al., 2023).

2. **Illustrated Stories and Role Play:** Presenting the stories of the prophets or Islamic moral values through storytelling methods and role-playing to strengthen the appreciation. The *pictorial and role play* approach is a pedagogical strategy that has proven effective in internalizing religious values in children, including children with the autism spectrum, through affective and imaginative pathways. This

method emphasizes the power of visual and performative narratives in conveying exemplary stories, especially those derived from prophetic history and Islamic moral teachings.

Akrim and Gunawan (2021) emphasized that *the Quranic storytelling* approach not only conveys religious messages verbally, but also stimulates the cognitive and emotional aspects of students through the symbolic power of stories (Akrim & Gunawan, 2021). In the context of autistic children who tend to have a high interest in consistent narrative structures and concrete visualizations, the use of illustrated stories becomes a medium that is friendly to their needs. The visualization of the characters, plots, and values contained in the story allows children to process information in a more structured and meaningful way.

Furthermore, the role-playing method allows children not only to passively understand values,

but also to internalize them through social imitation experiences. Al-Hawamleh (2019) states that storytelling and *role play* contribute to the formation of moral awareness because children are actively involved in simulated ethical decision-making (Al-Hawamleh, 2019). Rahiem et al. (2020) also found that dramatization in early childhood Islamic education has been shown to increase children's affective responses to the religious values taught (Rahiem et al., 2020). In addition, this approach is very much in line with the principle of *student-centered education*, where children are given space to express their understanding in the form of symbolic actions. This resonates with the concept of *moral enculturation* through narrative (Bennett, 2019) which is the process of instilling value through the appreciation of narrative experiences that are conveyed contextually and repeatedly.

In the context of children with autism, this approach also supports the need for flexible structure- and repetition-based learning (Kistoro et al., 2020). The use of illustrated stories can be combined with *visual schedule* and *task analysis* strategies, while *role play* can be modified into *scripted play* to suit the child's level of understanding and comfort.

Thus, pictorial stories and role play not only function as a medium for the transfer of Islamic values, but also as an educational intervention strategy that is inclusive, adaptive, and oriented towards the integrity of the development of autistic children. This approach bridges the symbolic world of religion with the pedagogical needs of children with special needs through meaningful narratives, visualizations, and social simulations.

3. Structured Repetition: Delivering materials such as prayers and ablution procedures on a

repetitive and scheduled basis to strengthen memory and understanding. Structured repetition is a pedagogical strategy designed to strengthen long-term memory and improve conceptual understanding in autistic learners through repetitive and scheduled presentation of material. This strategy is very important in learning Islamic Religious Education (PAI), especially to convey memorized and procedural materials such as daily prayers, ablution procedures, or prayer movements. Children on the autism spectrum generally have a tendency to repetitive behaviors and attachment to routines. The structured repetition approach not only capitalizes on this tendency pedagogically, but is also able to create a stable and predictable learning environment, which ultimately reduces anxiety and increases learning participation (Whalon et al., 2016), (Nowell & Hume, 2023) Research by Fusaroli et al. (2023) shows that

autistic children tend to spontaneously imitate adult language and speech patterns in the context of routine interactions, which can be utilized in repetitive learning processes (Fusaroli et al., 2023).

In practice, structured repetition can be implemented through a daily schedule that sets a specific time to recite short prayers, practice ablution, or get to know the pillars of Islam consistently. For example, teachers can integrate a five-minute session each morning to recite a classroom prayer, accompanied by consistent symbolic gestures, which are repeated daily. Models like this have been shown to be effective in reinforcing verbal and non-verbal imitations as described by Halbur et al. (2023), who examined the effectiveness of repetitive models in teaching object imitation in autistic children (Halbur et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Bilecik (2019) emphasized that strengthening the religiosity of autistic children in

the context of religious learning is highly dependent on visual and repetitive methods, because this allows religious information to be absorbed through consistent and concrete patterns (Bilecik, 2019).

This is in line with the findings of Kistoro et al. (2020) in the Indonesian context, where PAI teachers who implemented visual and verbal repetition-based learning in a structured manner showed a significant improvement in the understanding of basic religious values in autistic children (Kistoro et al., 2020).

Overall, structured repetition is not only an effective pedagogical technique, but also reflects a humanistic approach that understands the typical needs of autistic children in religious learning. This approach requires consistency, patience, and deep understanding from teachers in order to be able to internalize Islamic values into children's lives gradually and meaningfully. Zamry et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of adaptive

technology in religious learning, such as TaRL-based teacher companion applications to monitor the learning progress of autistic children individually (Zamry et al., 2024).

### **The Role of Teachers and Social Support**

Teachers play the role of facilitators who are able to adapt teaching styles to the neurodivergent needs of students. Social-pedagogical competence, empathy, and communication skills are the keys to the success of TaRL in inclusive classes. (Sakarneh et al., 2023) In addition, parental and community support greatly determines the sustainability of learning.

Fong et al. (2021) stated that solid informal support was positively correlated with the family resilience of autistic children in education (Fong et al., 2021). Smith et al. (2023) highlight the importance of two-way communication between teachers and parents of autistic children, particularly from minority backgrounds such as the Somali community, to avoid cultural

exclusion in religious education (Smith et al., 2023).

### **Analysis and Findings**

Analysis of the literature reviewed shows that the TaRL approach has great potential in increasing the effectiveness of PAI learning for autistic children in inclusive classes. Adjustment of learning materials and methods based on the actual level of ability of learners allows autistic children to learn according to their rhythm and learning style.

The findings of this study show that the integration of TaRL in PAI learning can improve understanding of religious concepts, active involvement in religious activities, and the spiritual development of autistic children. In addition, this approach also encourages collaboration between teachers, parents, and the community in supporting an inclusive and meaningful learning process.

### **D. Conclusion**

The *Teaching at the Right Level* (TaRL) approach has demonstrated its relevance and practical effectiveness in

the learning of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) for autistic children in inclusive classrooms. Based on field data obtained through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with teachers, parents, and special education staff, this study found that TaRL strategies such as initial level-based assessments, differentiated instruction, and the use of visual-religious media positively contributed to students' understanding of religious concepts and strengthened their spiritual awareness.

Moreover, the research revealed that successful implementation of TaRL in PAI learning depends on intensive collaboration among classroom teachers, special educators, and parents, as well as continuous professional development for teachers. Building an empathetic, responsive, and fair learning environment was a key component of pedagogical success, particularly in addressing the diverse cognitive and emotional needs of autistic students.

This study affirms that TaRL is not merely a technical framework but a pedagogical philosophy that values

neurodiversity and inclusivity in religious education. It provides a humanistic and transformative model that bridges the gap between educational content and the lived realities of autistic learners.

Future development should focus on scaling this approach in different inclusive school settings and expanding its application through technology-based adaptive tools. Such initiatives will further enrich the discourse and practice of Islamic education in responding to the contemporary challenge of inclusive and equitable learning for all children, regardless of their abilities.

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