

Leadership Synergy And Collaboration In Advanced Inclusive Early Childhood Islamic Education

Maryani^{1*}, Adi Wibowo², Nurvianna Mua'arifah³, Oktaviana Nur Handayani⁴

^{1,2,3,4} Institut Agama Islam An Nawawi, Purworejo, Indonesia

*e-mail: maryanimuhammad@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has become a global priority in promoting equal access to quality learning for all children, including those with special needs. In the context of Islamic-based Early Childhood Education (PAUD) in Indonesia, the implementation of inclusive practices remains a complex challenge that requires strong leadership and effective institutional management. This study aims to analyze the management strategies employed by RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono in strengthening inclusive education within an Islamic early childhood institution. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, parents, and special education assistants, as well as documentation analysis. The data were analyzed thematically through stages of reduction, presentation, and interpretation following Miles and Huberman's model. The findings reveal five key managerial aspects influencing the success of inclusive education: transformational and visionary leadership, continuous teacher training, active parental and community engagement, adaptive infrastructure, and an inclusive school culture grounded in empathy and diversity. These elements form an integrated system that aligns pedagogical inclusivity with spiritual and cultural values. The study contributes to the theory of inclusive educational management by presenting a contextual model that integrates leadership, teacher empowerment, and community partnership within a faith-based framework. Practically, it provides insights for Islamic early childhood institutions in developing sustainable and locally relevant inclusive practices. Further research involving multiple institutions is recommended to explore variations in leadership styles and inclusion models across different cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has emerged as a global educational paradigm emphasizing equal access and participation for all learners, regardless of individual differences or disabilities. UNESCO (2020) emphasizes that inclusive education represents not merely the placement of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms but also the creation of supportive environments that promote belonging, acceptance, and academic success for every learner. Over the last decade, many countries have integrated inclusive principles into their early childhood education policies, recognizing that the early years are critical for cognitive, emotional, and social development (Peters, 2019). This global

movement underscores that inclusivity is fundamental to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 ensuring quality education for all.

In Indonesia, the policy framework for inclusive education is embedded in the Permendiknas No. 70/2009 and reinforced through various ministerial initiatives to promote access for children with special needs. However, its implementation at the early childhood level, particularly within Islamic-based early education institutions (RA or Raudhatul Athfal), remains inconsistent (Suryana, 2020). The early childhood period is highly sensitive, where children's interactions shape lifelong attitudes toward diversity and inclusion (Hapsari & Rachmawati, 2022). Therefore, inclusive practices in early childhood institutions play a vital role in fostering empathy, tolerance, and equality from the earliest stages of education.

Despite increasing awareness, the effective realization of inclusive early childhood education in Indonesia continues to face structural, cultural, and managerial barriers. Studies show that many preschool institutions still lack sufficient teacher training, adaptive learning resources, and inclusive evaluation mechanisms (Ismail & Kustandi, 2020). Moreover, social stigma and misconceptions about children with disabilities persist, limiting community and parental involvement (Lindsay et al., 2019). As a result, the vision of inclusivity often remains rhetorical rather than transformative, particularly in faith-based institutions that require contextual adaptation of inclusive values.

Leadership and collaboration are two interrelated pillars in advancing inclusive education. Transformational leadership characterized by vision, empowerment, and shared goals has been shown to enhance teacher commitment and inclusive pedagogical practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Ainscow, 2020). Furthermore, collaborative engagement among school leaders, teachers, parents, and communities promotes shared ownership of inclusive values (Brock & Carter, 2021). These managerial and interpersonal dynamics are crucial to overcoming systemic barriers and cultivating inclusive learning environments, especially within early childhood settings.

However, existing studies largely concentrate on primary and secondary schools, with limited attention to inclusive management in early childhood education institutions (PAUD), particularly Islamic-based ones (Rahmawati & Firmansyah, 2021). Many RA institutions lack systematic managerial strategies to address diversity, often due to limited resources and insufficient professional development programs (Ainscow & Miles, 2018). The integration of inclusive values within Islamic educational philosophies such as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (universal compassion) presents both challenges and opportunities in realizing inclusive practices that align with moral and religious principles.

The literature reveals a gap in contextualized models of inclusive management for early childhood institutions that reflect local socio-religious realities (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Suryana, 2020). Few studies explore how leadership styles and collaborative cultures operate synergistically to strengthen inclusive practices in RA institutions. Moreover, innovative managerial strategies that respond to contemporary challenges such as digitalization, curriculum adaptation, and stakeholder engagement are rarely documented (Wijaya & Mahmudah, 2023). Addressing this gap is essential for developing a sustainable and culturally grounded model of inclusive education management in Indonesia.

RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono serves as a representative case for examining the dynamics of inclusive management in faith-based early childhood education. The institution has been recognized for its progressive leadership and structured collaboration involving teachers, parents, and local communities. Its strategic initiatives ranging from inclusive curriculum design to teacher mentoring and community partnerships offer valuable insights into how inclusivity can be institutionalized beyond pedagogical approaches. Analyzing this case provides empirical grounding for understanding the managerial dimensions of inclusive education at the micro-institutional level.

This study aims to analyze how RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono implements inclusive education management through synergistic leadership and collaborative practices in responding to contemporary educational challenges. Specifically, it identifies the managerial strategies adopted, examines supporting and inhibiting factors, and evaluates their impact on the creation of inclusive learning environments. By focusing on the intersection of leadership and collaboration, this research seeks to articulate a practical framework that bridges policy and classroom realities. Theoretically, this article contributes to the discourse on inclusive early childhood education by offering a contextualized model of management rooted in Islamic educational values and local realities. Practically, it provides actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and institutional leaders seeking to strengthen inclusivity within early learning settings. The findings are expected to guide the development of training, policy formulation, and collaborative systems that make inclusive education both sustainable and culturally meaningful in Indonesia.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach, which aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of inclusive education management practices at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono. The qualitative case study approach was chosen because it aligns with the complex and contextual nature of the phenomenon being investigated namely, how leadership and collaboration operate to strengthen inclusive early childhood education. According to Yin (2018), a case study allows researchers to explore real-life contexts comprehensively when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its environment are not clearly evident. This approach is particularly relevant for examining the managerial, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions of inclusive education within a faith-based early childhood institution. The focus is not merely to describe, but to interpret the institutional strategies that embed inclusivity in daily practices and governance structures (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Sources and Data Collection Techniques The data in this study were collected from multiple sources to ensure the validity and richness of information. The primary data were obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Observations focused on classroom interactions, inclusive teaching practices, and parent involvement in the educational process. In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, classroom teachers, special education assistants (*guru pendamping khusus*), and parents of children with special needs. The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, which allows the selection of participants who possess rich information relevant to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015). Meanwhile, the secondary data consisted of institutional documents such as internal policy manuals, lesson plans (RPPH), individualized learning plans (RPI), and student progress records. Triangulation of data sources and methods was used to strengthen the credibility of findings, supported by member checking with key informants to validate interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness Data analysis was conducted through a thematic analysis approach following the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving three concurrent steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data from interviews, observations, and documents. The data display stage involved organizing coded data into categories and themes, while the conclusion drawing stage entailed interpreting the patterns emerging from the data in light of theories of inclusive education management. Throughout this process, reflexivity and researcher memoing were employed to maintain analytical transparency. The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through credibility (triangulation and member checking), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (peer debriefing). This rigorous methodological process enabled the research to

produce contextually grounded insights into the management of inclusive early childhood education in Islamic institutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research reveals that the success of strengthening inclusive education at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono is based on five key managerial aspects that interact systemically: visionary and transformational leadership, strengthening teacher competencies, parent and community involvement, adapting facilities and infrastructure, and developing a school culture that values diversity. These five components form an inclusive ecosystem that is managed in a planned, participatory, and sustainable manner within the context of an Islamic-based early childhood education institution. These findings demonstrate that the success of inclusive education depends not only on formal policies but also on managerial practices that are responsive to real needs on the ground.

The leadership of the RA principal is a key foundation for realizing inclusivity within the school environment. Interviews with the RA principal revealed a strong commitment to making the institution a learning space for all children without discrimination. The principal consistently communicates an inclusive vision through regular meetings, teacher forums, and parent meetings. During field observations, researchers noted how the RA principal actively monitored the implementation of learning and provided direct feedback to teachers regarding adaptations of learning strategies for children with special needs. This type of leadership demonstrates the characteristics of transformational leadership, as described by Leithwood and Jantzi (2005), in which leaders not only direct but also inspire change through empowering organizational members.

The implementation of the inclusive vision at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono is also reflected in flexible and adaptive institutional policies. For example, the admission policy does not restrict students to special needs, as long as the school can provide appropriate support. The RA principal forms an inclusive collaborative team consisting of classroom teachers, special assistance teachers (GPK), and parent representatives to discuss each child's learning progress. This effort reinforces the research findings of Ainscow and Sandill (2010), which asserted that a collaborative culture under visionary leadership is key to the success of inclusive education. With this approach, RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono not only practices inclusion administratively but also makes it part of its institutional identity.

The second aspect identified was the strengthening of teacher competencies through ongoing training. Based on documentation of school activities, internal training is conducted quarterly on topics tailored to needs, such as developing Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), differentiated learning strategies, and effective communication techniques with children with special needs. In an interview, one teacher stated, "I used to be afraid of mishandling autistic children, but after the training, I feel calmer and know how to provide appropriate stimulation." This indicates a positive change in teacher confidence and competency following the training. This finding is consistent with Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who emphasized the importance of reflection and ongoing professional learning in improving the effectiveness of inclusive practices.

Furthermore, parent and community involvement is a crucial dimension in strengthening inclusive systems. Field data shows that RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono holds bimonthly parent meetings and home visits for children with special needs. These activities not only strengthen the emotional bond between teachers and families but also foster a sense of mutual trust. One parent said, "We feel like we're part of the school, not just a delivery person for our children." This partnership model reinforces Epstein's (2011) concept of school-family partnerships, which states that equal collaboration between families and schools positively impacts child development and the

sustainability of inclusive programs. This finding also aligns with Hardianto (2025), who stated that digital partnerships and two-way communication expand parental participation in early childhood education.

The fourth aspect identified in this study was the adaptation of facilities and infrastructure to support inclusion. Observations revealed classroom modifications to make them more welcoming to children with special needs, for example, by arranging flexible desk layouts, providing quiet stimulation areas, and using visual and audio aids. The school also established a simple counseling corner for children who needed quiet time. These efforts align with UNESCO guidelines (2009), which emphasize the importance of physical and psychological access in creating an inclusive learning environment. This adaptation demonstrates the institution's awareness that inclusion is not just about teaching methods, but also about accessibility and comfort for children in interacting with their learning environment.

A school culture that values diversity was the final important finding in this study. Based on observations of daily activities, teachers frequently engaged children in simple discussions about differences, such as through stories, games, and shared reflections. Teachers referred to differences as "beauty created by God so that we can learn to understand each other." This approach is effective in instilling empathy from an early age, as explained by Booth and Ainscow (2011), who argued that the formation of an inclusive culture must begin with values that are lived out in daily interactions. The school also held a "Children's Diversity Day" activity, where each child showcased their unique talents without labels or comparisons. This reinforced the spirit of an inclusive culture that underpins the institution's management.

The interaction between these five aspects demonstrates that inclusive management at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono is systemic and sustainable. Visionary leadership establishes policy direction, teacher training enhances implementation capacity, parental involvement expands social support, facility adaptations create a comfortable learning environment, and the school culture ensures the persistence of inclusive values. This model aligns with research by Bandhesa & Noviani (2025), which highlights the importance of synergy between leadership, collaboration, and organizational culture in the context of local value-based educational institutions. Therefore, the inclusive managerial approach at RA can serve as a model for good practice for other early childhood education institutions in Indonesia.

This research provides theoretical and practical contributions to the development of inclusive education management. Theoretically, the results enrich the literature on transformational leadership and inclusive culture by adding spiritual dimensions and local wisdom to the context of Islamic education. Practically, this management model can be replicated through principal training, strengthening parent networks, and providing child-friendly learning resources. However, this research also has limitations, as it focused on a single institution. Further studies are recommended to expand the sample and compare practices across various socio-cultural contexts to develop a more comprehensive and adaptable model.

Table 1: Interview Notes from the Study at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono

No.	Informant	Main Theme	Key Statement (Direct Quotation)	Researcher's Interpretation
1	Principal	Visionary and Transformational Leadership	"I believe that every child deserves the best education, regardless of their background or condition."	The principal demonstrates transformational leadership by embedding an inclusive vision rooted in empathy and educational equity.

2	Class Teacher A	Teacher Training and Competence	“After joining the training, I learned how to develop Individual Learning Plans and adjust my teaching methods for children with autism.”	Internal training increased teachers’ confidence and competence in applying differentiated learning strategies.
3	Special Education Assistant (GPK)	Collaboration and Mentoring	“We regularly discuss children’s progress with class teachers. Every week, we hold small evaluations to adjust strategies.”	Collaboration between the class teacher and the special education assistant strengthens adaptive and continuous inclusive practices.
4	Parent of a Child with Special Needs	Parental Involvement and Support	“The school often invites us for discussions. We feel listened to, not just instructed.”	Two-way communication fosters trust and builds a positive partnership between families and the school.
5	Class Teacher B	School Culture and Diversity Values	“We often remind the children that every friend is special in their own way.”	Teachers instill empathy and acceptance as integral components of the school’s inclusive culture.
6	Principal	Adaptation of Facilities and Infrastructure	“We modified the classroom to make it flexible; there’s a quiet corner and visual aids for children with special needs.”	Physical adaptation of learning environments reflects the institution’s awareness of accessibility and comfort.
7	School Committee Representative	Community Collaboration	“We support school programs by providing learning materials and participating in parenting sessions.”	Community involvement reinforces external support for the sustainability of inclusive education.
8	Senior Teacher	Program Reflection and Evaluation	“At the end of each semester, we sit together to evaluate what went well and what needs improvement.”	Collective reflection functions as an internal quality management mechanism that supports the school’s learning culture.

The interview findings indicate that inclusive practices at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono are built upon open communication, cross-role collaboration, and continuous reflection. The principal plays a pivotal role as the driver of inclusive vision and policy, teachers strengthen pedagogical capacity through ongoing professional development, while parents and the community contribute moral and material support. This pattern aligns with Booth and Ainscow (2011), who argue that effective inclusion emerges from the synergistic interaction between leadership, teacher competence, and community engagement. The findings also resonate with Leithwood & Jantzi (2005) and Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011), emphasizing that sustainable inclusive education requires shared responsibility, adaptive leadership, and reflective teaching culture.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study emphasize that the success of inclusive education in Islamic-based early childhood institutions (PAUD) is shaped not merely by national policy frameworks but by the institution's internal capacity to manage resources, exercise transformational leadership, and embed inclusive values into the organizational culture. At RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono, inclusion is understood as both a pedagogical strategy and a moral commitment grounded in faith-based principles. This interpretation situates inclusion within a broader socio-religious context, highlighting that inclusive management in Islamic education integrates professional, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.

The role of transformational leadership emerges as a central pillar in sustaining inclusion. The principal's leadership style inspired collective commitment, encouraged reflective practice, and motivated teachers through value-driven guidance. Her approach demonstrates that leadership anchored in spirituality and compassion can mobilize change more effectively than policy compliance alone. This finding extends the framework of Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) by illustrating how faith-based motivation deepens teachers' intrinsic engagement with inclusive practices, resonating with Ainscow and Sandill (2010) who emphasize leadership as the driving force behind inclusive reform.

Teacher development plays a vital role in maintaining inclusive quality. Through continuous professional learning, teachers at RA Kuntum Kusuma refined their ability to design individualized learning plans and apply differentiated pedagogical approaches. These initiatives promoted confidence, reflective practice, and adaptability in classroom management. The process validates Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) notion of teacher agency, where educators act not merely as executors of policy but as innovators who shape inclusive pedagogy through daily interaction. Such empowerment has proven essential for sustaining inclusive teaching across varied learning contexts.

Community collaboration significantly strengthens the inclusive environment. The involvement of parents and the local community through home visits, parenting sessions, and participatory school programs fosters mutual understanding and shared responsibility for child development. These findings expand upon Epstein's (2011) overlapping spheres of influence model by incorporating the Indonesian concept of *gotong royong*, or collective cooperation, as a cultural foundation for inclusive partnership. The school's success demonstrates that inclusion becomes more effective when supported by culturally embedded collaboration that unites educators, families, and society.

The study also reveals that inclusive education depends on adaptable infrastructure and a supportive physical environment. Classrooms designed with flexible seating, assistive visual-audio tools, and quiet spaces for children with special needs provide both accessibility and emotional comfort. Such measures confirm UNESCO's (2009) assertion that inclusion must address physical, psychological, and cognitive access simultaneously. The experience of RA Kuntum Kusuma indicates that structural and environmental modifications are not auxiliary to inclusion but integral to its realization in early learning settings.

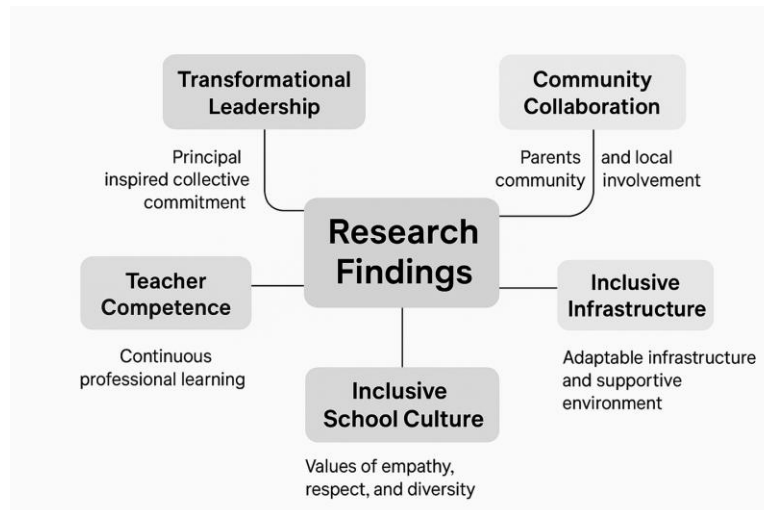


Figure 1: Research Findings

The findings of this study illustrate that the success of inclusive education at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono is achieved through a synergy of transformational leadership, teacher competency enhancement, parent and community involvement, infrastructure adaptation, and the establishment of a school culture that values diversity. The RA principal acts as a visionary leader who instills inclusive values and mobilizes all components of the institution to actively collaborate. Teachers who receive ongoing training are able to implement differentiated learning and develop Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), while parental involvement through parenting programs and home visits strengthens social support for children with special needs. Adapting the physical environment and providing learning aids contribute to creating a safe and comfortable space for all children, while a school culture based on empathy and respect for differences fosters a sense of togetherness. All of these aspects demonstrate that the management of inclusive education at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono is not merely administrative, but a collaborative practice rooted in Indonesian religious and socio-cultural values.

Underlying all of these efforts is a robust inclusive school culture built on empathy, respect, and mutual cooperation. Teachers and students are encouraged to view diversity as a blessing, and inclusion as a collective responsibility rather than an external directive. This approach aligns with Booth and Ainscow's (2011) Index for Inclusion, affirming that sustainable inclusion grows from values deeply embedded in the life of the institution. Theoretically, this study contributes a contextual model of inclusive management that integrates transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and community partnership within a faith-based framework. Practically, it offers actionable guidance for early childhood institutions seeking to establish locally relevant and sustainable inclusion. While the single-case design limits generalization, future research across multiple regions could further validate the applicability of this model in diverse cultural and educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study concludes that the success of inclusive education at RA Kuntum Kusuma Ani Yudhoyono is built through the integration of five key managerial aspects: value-oriented transformational leadership, strengthening teacher competency through ongoing training, active involvement of parents and the community, adapting child-friendly infrastructure, and a school culture that values diversity. These findings provide a deeper understanding that inclusion in Islamic-based early childhood education is not merely a policy implementation, but rather a contextual and spiritually valuable managerial process. The theoretical contribution of this study expands the concepts of transformational leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005), teacher agency (Florian &

Black-Hawkins, 2011), and inclusive culture (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) by adding religious and social dimensions unique to Indonesia. In a social and cultural context, the results of this study indicate that inclusive practices rooted in religious values and mutual cooperation have great potential to strengthen social cohesion and foster empathy from an early age. Although this research is limited to a single case study, the results open up opportunities for further exploration of inclusive management models in various early childhood education contexts with diverse cultural characteristics.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that Islamic-based early childhood education institutions strengthen their transformational leadership capacity through inclusive management training and ongoing professional development for teachers. Education practitioners can use these findings as guidance for building strategic collaborations between schools, families, and communities in supporting children with special needs. For academics, this research can serve as a basis for developing a conceptual model of inclusive management that integrates religious, social, and pedagogical values. Further research is recommended to involve more institutions in various regions and utilize a broader data triangulation approach to strengthen the validity of the findings and enrich our understanding of inclusive practices in early childhood education contexts in Indonesia.

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