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Between Policy and Practice: Teachers' Lived Narratives of Deep Learning Implementation, Classroom Interaction, and Learning Transformation in Indonesian Elementary Education

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ABSTRACT

Background. The implementation of deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital transformation has become an important agenda in improving the quality of Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools. However, the translation of policy into classroom practice often depends on teachers' readiness, pedagogical understanding, digital competence, and school-level support.

Purpose. This study aims to explore teachers' experiences in bridging educational policy and classroom practice through the strengthening of deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and the digital transformation of Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools.

Method. This study employed a qualitative research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving Islamic Religious Education teachers at the elementary school level. The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to deep learning practices, character formation, digital integration, and implementation challenges.

Results. The findings indicate that teachers understand deep learning as a process of promoting meaningful understanding, reflection, critical engagement, and the internalization of Islamic values. Character-based pedagogy is implemented through habituation, moral exemplification, classroom dialogue, and the integration of religious values into daily learning activities. Digital transformation supports Islamic Religious Education through multimedia resources, interactive learning platforms, and online assessment tools. However, its implementation is constrained by limited infrastructure, varying levels of digital literacy, unequal access to technology, and insufficient professional development.

Conclusion. The study concludes that the successful transformation of Islamic Religious Education requires stronger alignment between policy expectations and classroom realities. Continuous teacher training, institutional support, adequate digital infrastructure, and context-sensitive pedagogical strategies are essential to strengthen deep learning, character formation, and digital integration in elementary Islamic Religious Education.

KEYWORDS

Character-Based Pedagogy, Deep Learning, Digital Transformation, Elementary Schools, Islamic Religious Education

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of elementary education in the twenty-first century is increasingly shaped by the demand to move beyond content transmission toward meaningful, reflective, and value-oriented learning (Sufyadi et al., 2026). In many educational systems, curriculum reform, digital innovation, and character formation have become central concerns in improving the quality of teaching and learning. This issue is particularly relevant in Islamic Religious Education, hereafter referred to as IRE, at the elementary school level. IRE is not only concerned with the transmission of religious knowledge, but also with the formation of faith, morality, discipline, responsibility, social care, and ethical conduct in students' everyday lives (Dwiyani & Fadli, 2023). Therefore, the success of IRE cannot be measured only by students' ability to remember religious concepts, rituals, or doctrines, but also by how religious values are internalized, practiced, and reflected in students' character and behavior (Muqowim & Lessy, 2021).

In the Indonesian elementary school context, the role of IRE teachers has become increasingly complex. Teachers are expected to implement curriculum policies, strengthen students' character, design meaningful learning experiences, and integrate digital technologies into classroom instruction (Ali & Hidayat, 2026). These expectations are often framed within broader educational policy discourses that emphasize student-centered learning, character education, and digital transformation. However, the movement from policy to classroom practice is rarely linear. Teachers may understand policy expectations differently, interpret pedagogical concepts according to their own classroom realities, and face various constraints such as limited infrastructure, unequal access to technology, insufficient training, administrative demands, and diverse student backgrounds (Mukmin, Yusuf, et al., 2024). This creates an important research problem: although policy promotes deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital transformation, the actual implementation of these ideas depends heavily on teachers' experiences, agency, readiness, and contextual conditions (Pebrina et al., 2026).

The concept of deep learning in education has gained attention as a response to superficial learning practices that emphasize memorization, examination performance, and passive reception of knowledge. Sm & Sari, (2024) conceptualize deep learning as a pedagogical orientation that develops students' global competencies, including character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. In this view, deep learning is not merely a method, but a transformation of learning culture. It encourages students to connect knowledge with real-life contexts, construct meaning, reflect on values, solve problems, and engage actively in learning. In the context of IRE, deep learning is particularly relevant because religious education requires more than cognitive mastery. Students need opportunities to understand religious teachings deeply, relate them to moral choices, and practice Islamic values in social and personal contexts (Kurniawan & Limei, 2021).

Previous studies have shown that deep learning can support meaningful learning by encouraging reflection, critical engagement, and value internalization. Research on deep learning in Islamic education has begun to discuss its potential for transforming IRE from a teacher-centered and memorization-based subject into a more reflective, contextual, and student-centered learning experience. Studies on the Merdeka Curriculum and Islamic Religious Education, for example, indicate that deep learning can be used to support character formation by encouraging students to understand the meaning of Islamic teachings rather than merely memorizing religious materials (Romlah et al., 2024). Other works have also highlighted the importance of integrating real-world contexts, collaboration, personalization, and digital resources into deep learning design. However, much of the existing literature remains conceptual, normative, or model-oriented. There is still a

need for empirical studies that examine how teachers themselves experience, interpret, and negotiate deep learning in actual elementary school classrooms (Eko Atmojo et al., 2025).

Character-based pedagogy is another important dimension of this study. Character education has long been a central concern in elementary education because childhood is a crucial period for moral, emotional, social, and spiritual development (Musnandar & Hidayati, 2024). In IRE classrooms, character education is closely related to the formation of *akhlaq*, or moral conduct, which includes honesty, responsibility, respect, discipline, empathy, humility, and care for others. Character-based pedagogy does not operate only through formal instruction; it is also practiced through habituation, teacher modeling, classroom interaction, moral dialogue, school culture, and everyday routines. Teachers play a central role because students often learn moral values not only from what teachers say, but also from how teachers behave, respond to problems, manage the classroom, and build relationships with students (Naldi & Srisudarso, 2024).

Nevertheless, character-based pedagogy in the digital era faces new challenges. Elementary school students are increasingly exposed to digital media, online content, and changing patterns of communication. These developments create both opportunities and risks. Digital resources can enrich IRE learning through videos, interactive media, online quizzes, digital storytelling, and access to broader religious learning materials (Harris et al., 2025). At the same time, digital exposure may also influence students' attention, behavior, moral reasoning, and religious practices. For this reason, IRE teachers are expected to be able to integrate digital technology without weakening the human, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of religious education. The challenge is not simply whether technology is used, but how it is used pedagogically, ethically, and meaningfully.

Current debates on digital transformation in education emphasize that technology should not be treated as a neutral tool or a simple solution to educational problems. Digital transformation requires alignment between infrastructure, teacher competence, curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, leadership, and school culture. Kiri & Dara, (2024) emphasizes that technology can support access, inclusion, quality, and system management, but it may also create new risks when adopted without clear educational purposes. Similarly, international discussions on digital education underline the importance of building effective digital ecosystems rather than focusing only on devices or platforms. In Indonesia, the digitalization of education has expanded through online learning platforms, teacher training programs, and digital learning resources. However, studies on teacher training show that many programs still focus on basic digital literacy and remote learning, while deeper forms of pedagogical support, coaching, and contextualized professional development remain limited.

This situation reveals a significant gap in the literature. Existing research has discussed deep learning, character education, and digital transformation as important themes in education. However, these themes are often examined separately. Studies on deep learning tend to focus on pedagogical design and student competencies (Ahmad & Nurhadi, 2026). Studies on character education often emphasize moral values, habituation, and school culture. Studies on digital transformation usually focus on technology integration, digital competence, infrastructure, or online learning. Fewer studies examine how these three dimensions intersect in the lived experiences of IRE teachers in elementary schools. This gap is important because teachers do not experience policy in separate categories. In classroom practice, teachers must simultaneously interpret curriculum expectations, cultivate students' character, design meaningful religious learning, and use digital tools under specific institutional and socio-cultural conditions (Salehudin et al., 2023).

The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to bridge policy and practice by examining teachers' experiences at the intersection of deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital

transformation in elementary IRE. Rather than treating teachers merely as policy implementers, this study positions them as active agents who interpret, adapt, negotiate, and sometimes struggle with policy expectations. By focusing on teachers' experiences, the study provides a more grounded understanding of how educational transformation occurs in everyday classroom realities. This perspective contributes to existing scholarship by showing that the success of deep learning and digital transformation in religious education depends not only on curriculum documents or technological availability, but also on teachers' pedagogical beliefs, moral commitments, digital readiness, institutional support, and contextual constraints (Dwiyaning & Fadli, 2023).

This study is guided by the assumption that effective IRE transformation requires the integration of three pedagogical dimensions. First, deep learning is needed to help students move from memorization toward meaningful understanding and reflective internalization of Islamic values. Second, character-based pedagogy is needed to translate religious knowledge into moral habits, ethical behavior, and social responsibility (Kholifah, Nurtanto, Mutohhari, et al., 2024). Third, digital transformation is needed to enrich learning resources and expand pedagogical possibilities, provided that technology remains aligned with educational and spiritual purposes. These dimensions are not treated as independent variables in a statistical sense, but as interrelated thematic foci explored through teachers' experiences.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore how elementary school IRE teachers experience the process of bridging educational policy and classroom practice through the strengthening of deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital transformation. Specifically, the study investigates how teachers understand deep learning in IRE, how they implement character-based pedagogy in classroom activities, how they integrate digital technologies into religious learning, and what challenges they encounter in translating policy expectations into practice. Using a qualitative research design, this study draws on semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The data are analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to pedagogical practice, value internalization, digital integration, and implementation challenges (Ahmad & Nurhadi, 2026).

By addressing these issues, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on Islamic Religious Education, teacher agency, character education, and digital pedagogy. It offers empirical insight into the realities of elementary school teachers who are expected to enact multiple educational reforms simultaneously (Subakti et al., 2026). The findings are expected to inform policymakers, school leaders, teacher educators, and practitioners about the kinds of support needed to make policy implementation more meaningful, context-sensitive, and sustainable. More broadly, the study argues that the transformation of IRE in elementary schools should not be understood merely as a technical matter of curriculum change or technology adoption, but as a pedagogical, moral, and institutional process that depends on teachers' capacity to connect policy ideals with classroom realities (A'yunin et al., 2022).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore teachers' experiences in bridging educational policy and classroom practice through the strengthening of deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and the digital transformation of Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand teachers' meanings, interpretations, classroom practices, and contextual challenges rather than to measure predetermined variables statistically. The research was conducted in Samarinda City, East Kalimantan Province, Indonesia, involving elementary schools that implemented Islamic Religious

Education as part of the formal curriculum and had begun to integrate digital learning resources into classroom instruction. The participants consisted of 10 Islamic Religious Education teachers from 10 elementary schools located in Samarinda City. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on several criteria: they were active Islamic Religious Education teachers, had teaching experience in elementary schools, were involved in implementing current curriculum policies, and had experience using digital media or technology-supported learning activities in their teaching (Mukmin, Subakti, et al., 2024).

The main instruments used in this study were semi-structured interview guidelines, classroom observation sheets, and document analysis protocols (Kholifah et al., 2023). The semi-structured interview guideline was designed to obtain information about teachers' understanding of deep learning, their strategies for implementing character-based pedagogy, their experiences in using digital technologies, and the challenges they encountered in translating educational policy into classroom practice. The classroom observation sheet was used to record learning activities, teacher-student interactions, the integration of Islamic values, the use of digital media, and evidence of meaningful or reflective learning. The document analysis protocol was used to examine relevant teaching documents, including lesson plans, teaching modules, learning materials, assessment instruments, and school policy documents related to Islamic Religious Education, character education, and digital learning. These instruments were developed based on the research objectives and were reviewed before data collection to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the focus of the study.

Data were collected from January to March 2026 through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews were conducted with Islamic Religious Education teachers to obtain in-depth accounts of their experiences, perceptions, and pedagogical decisions. Each interview followed the same general topics while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues that emerged during the conversation. Classroom observations were conducted to understand how teachers implemented deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital technology in actual classroom settings. During observations, attention was given not only to teaching strategies but also to classroom routines, moral exemplification, student engagement, learning resources, and the relationship between policy expectations and practical implementation. Document analysis was conducted to compare teachers' reported experiences with written instructional plans and school-level policy documents. The combination of these techniques enabled the researcher to obtain a richer and more balanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Kholifah, Nurtanto, Kassymova, et al., 2024).

The data collection procedure began with the identification of schools and participants that met the criteria of the study. After obtaining permission from the relevant school authorities and consent from participants, the researcher scheduled interviews and classroom observations. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent and supported by field notes. Classroom observations were documented using observation sheets and descriptive notes. Relevant documents were collected or reviewed with permission from the teachers and schools. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study by ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right of participants to withdraw from the research at any stage. Participants' names and school identities were not disclosed in the reporting of the findings.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents (Sudarmanto et al., 2022). Initial codes were then generated to identify meaningful units related to

teachers' understanding of deep learning, implementation of character-based pedagogy, use of digital technologies, policy interpretation, and classroom challenges. These codes were grouped into broader themes that represented recurring patterns across the data. The themes were reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the research objectives and the existing literature on Islamic Religious Education, deep learning, character education, teacher agency, and digital pedagogy. The analysis did not use statistical tests because the study was qualitative and focused on meaning, experience, and contextual interpretation rather than numerical comparison (Net et al., 2024). Instead, the credibility of the findings was strengthened through the systematic comparison of data from interviews, observations, and documents.

Several strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Triangulation was applied by comparing data from different sources and techniques, namely interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review or clarify key points from their interview data to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation (Sudarwati et al., 2025). Peer discussion was used to examine the consistency of coding and theme development. An audit trail was maintained by documenting the research procedures, coding process, analytical decisions, and changes made during data interpretation. Thick description was also used in presenting the findings so that readers could understand the context of the study and evaluate the transferability of the results to similar educational settings (Jaedun et al., 2024).

The scope of this methodology was limited to the experiences of 10 Islamic Religious Education teachers from 10 elementary schools in Samarinda City, East Kalimantan Province. Therefore, the findings are not intended to be generalized statistically to all Islamic Religious Education teachers or all elementary schools. Rather, the study aims to provide an in-depth and contextual understanding of how teachers interpret and implement policy expectations related to deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital transformation. The study also relied on teachers' narratives, observed classroom practices, and available documents, which means that the findings reflect the specific contexts, participants, and institutional conditions involved in the research (Net et al., 2024). Despite these limitations, the use of multiple data sources and systematic thematic analysis provides a strong basis for understanding the relationship between educational policy and classroom practice in elementary Islamic Religious Education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that Islamic Religious Education teachers in elementary schools experience the implementation of deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital transformation as an interconnected process rather than as three separate educational agendas. Based on interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving 10 Islamic Religious Education teachers from 10 elementary schools in Samarinda City, East Kalimantan, four major patterns emerged: teachers' reinterpretation of deep learning in religious education, the centrality of character formation in classroom practice, the selective use of digital technology to support learning, and the continuing gap between policy expectations and school-level realities. These findings answer the main concern of this study by showing that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education depends not only on curriculum policy, but also on teachers' pedagogical agency, moral commitment, digital readiness, and institutional support.

The first major finding shows that teachers understood deep learning as a process of helping students move beyond memorization toward meaningful understanding, reflection, and internalization of Islamic values. In classroom practice, deep learning was not always expressed through advanced pedagogical terminology, but through activities that encouraged students to

connect religious teachings with everyday experiences. For example, teachers asked students to relate lessons on honesty, discipline, prayer, gratitude, and respect for parents to situations in their homes, schools, and peer interactions. This finding suggests that deep learning in Islamic Religious Education is closely related to moral and spiritual meaning-making. It is not limited to cognitive depth, but also includes affective and behavioral dimensions. This interpretation is consistent with the broader understanding of deep learning as learning that supports meaning, engagement, reflection, and the application of knowledge in real-life contexts. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, however, this study extends the discussion by showing that deep learning is also connected to the internalization of religious values and the formation of students' moral awareness.

The second finding reveals that character-based pedagogy remained the most dominant and familiar approach used by teachers. Teachers implemented character education through habituation, moral exemplification, classroom dialogue, religious routines, and integration of Islamic values into daily learning activities. Classroom observations showed that teachers commonly began lessons with greetings, prayers, short moral reminders, and reflective questions. Teachers also used everyday classroom events, such as student conflicts, lack of discipline, or cooperation during group work, as opportunities to discuss Islamic values. This indicates that character-based pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education is not merely a formal instructional strategy, but a continuous process embedded in classroom culture. The finding supports previous studies emphasizing that character education requires modeling, habituation, emotional engagement, and consistency between school values and teacher behavior. However, this study adds that in elementary Islamic Religious Education, character pedagogy functions as a bridge between policy language and classroom reality. Teachers may not always use the formal vocabulary of policy documents, but they translate policy expectations into practical routines and moral interactions that are understandable for children.

The third finding shows that digital transformation in Islamic Religious Education was implemented selectively and pragmatically. Teachers used digital media such as learning videos, presentation slides, online quizzes, digital worksheets, and messaging applications to support instruction and communication. Digital tools helped teachers explain abstract religious concepts, present stories of prophets, display prayer movements, provide visual examples of good behavior, and assess students' understanding more interactively. However, the use of technology was not uniform across schools. Some teachers had access to projectors, internet connections, and digital devices, while others faced limited infrastructure and relied mostly on personal smartphones or simple digital resources. This finding confirms that digital transformation in education cannot be reduced to the availability of devices. It requires teacher competence, school support, infrastructure, and pedagogical clarity. In this study, teachers generally viewed technology as useful when it strengthened student engagement and understanding, but they were also careful not to let technology replace direct moral guidance, teacher-student interaction, and religious habituation.

Table 1. Major Findings on Teachers' Experiences in Bridging Policy and Practice

Major Theme	Evidence from Teachers' Experiences	Classroom Practice	Interpretation
Deep learning in Islamic Religious Education	Teachers emphasized understanding, reflection, and value internalization	Connecting Islamic teachings with students' daily experiences	Deep learning in IRE includes cognitive, affective, and moral dimensions

Character-based pedagogy	Teachers used habituation, modeling, dialogue, and religious routines	Prayers, reminders, discipline, and value-based discussion	moral classroom culture and teacher behavior
Digital transformation	Teachers used videos, slides, online quizzes, and messaging platforms	Multimedia explanation, interactive assessment, and communication with students or parents	Technology supports learning when aligned with pedagogical and religious purposes
Policy-practice gap	Teachers faced infrastructure, training, time, and access constraints	Adaptation of policy expectations to local school conditions	Implementation depends on teacher agency and institutional support

The fourth finding concerns the gap between educational policy and classroom practice. Teachers generally supported the goals of deep learning, character education, and digital transformation, but they also reported several constraints. These included limited digital infrastructure, unequal access to technology among students, lack of continuous professional development, limited preparation time, and the challenge of translating broad policy concepts into concrete classroom strategies. Some teachers stated that policy terms such as “deep learning” or “digital transformation” were often introduced through workshops or official documents, but practical examples and sustained mentoring were still limited. This finding is important because it shows that policy implementation is not simply a matter of teacher compliance. Teachers must interpret, adapt, and negotiate policy based on their students’ needs, school resources, and their own professional capacity.

These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that educational reform often depends on teachers’ ability to translate policy into practice. Studies on deep learning emphasize the importance of meaningful engagement, student agency, collaboration, and reflective learning. The present study supports this perspective, but it also shows that in Islamic Religious Education, deep learning must be understood through the lens of value internalization and moral formation. Similarly, research on character education has emphasized the importance of habituation, modeling, and school culture. The findings of this study confirm these arguments, while also demonstrating that character-based pedagogy becomes more complex in the digital era because teachers must balance technological innovation with spiritual and ethical guidance. Research on digital transformation also indicates that technology can improve learning only when supported by infrastructure, teacher competence, and clear pedagogical goals. The present study reinforces this view by showing that digital tools in Islamic Religious Education are useful when they support explanation, engagement, reflection, and assessment, but they are insufficient when used without pedagogical and moral direction.

An important interpretation of these findings is that teachers function as mediators between policy discourse and classroom reality. They do not merely implement policy in a mechanical way. Instead, they translate policy into practices that fit the age, needs, and learning conditions of elementary students. In this sense, teachers’ agency becomes a key factor in the transformation of Islamic Religious Education. When teachers have strong pedagogical understanding and moral commitment, they are able to adapt deep learning and digital tools to support character formation. However, when teachers lack training, infrastructure, or institutional support, policy expectations may remain difficult to realize. This explains why the same policy may produce different classroom practices across schools.

An alternative explanation for the findings is that teachers' implementation of deep learning and digital transformation may be influenced not only by policy understanding, but also by school culture, leadership, facilities, student background, and parental support. For example, teachers in schools with better internet access and stronger administrative support may find it easier to use digital tools. Teachers in schools with strong religious routines may find it easier to integrate character-based pedagogy into daily learning. Therefore, differences in implementation should not be interpreted simply as differences in teacher competence. They also reflect broader institutional and contextual conditions. This interpretation prevents an overstatement of teacher responsibility and highlights the need to view policy implementation as a shared responsibility among teachers, school leaders, policymakers, parents, and the wider educational community.

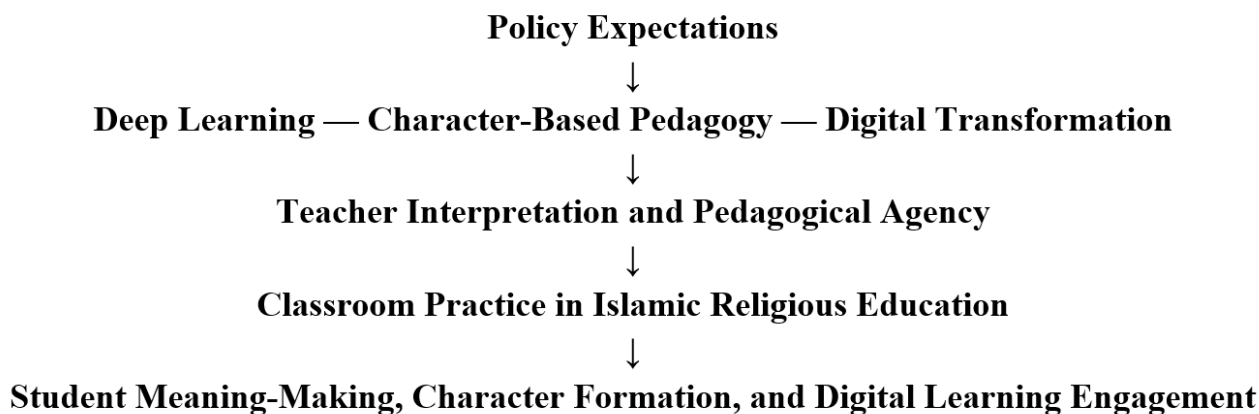


Figure 1. Conceptual Relationship between Policy and Practice in Elementary Islamic Religious Education

The figure shows that policy expectations are mediated by teachers' interpretation and agency before they become classroom practice. The quality of implementation is influenced by professional development, digital infrastructure, school culture, and student context.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study contributes to the scholarship on Islamic Religious Education by integrating three areas that are often discussed separately: deep learning, character education, and digital transformation. It shows that the future of Islamic Religious Education should not be framed only as a matter of curriculum reform or technology adoption, but as a pedagogical and moral transformation that depends on how teachers create meaningful, reflective, and value-oriented learning. Practically, the study suggests that teacher professional development should move beyond general policy socialization and basic digital literacy training. Teachers need concrete examples, mentoring, collaborative lesson design, and reflective practice that connect deep learning, character formation, and digital pedagogy. Schools also need to provide adequate infrastructure and create a supportive culture where teachers can experiment, evaluate, and improve their teaching practices.

The findings also have implications for policymakers. Policies promoting deep learning and digital transformation should be accompanied by clear pedagogical guidance that is sensitive to subject-specific contexts such as Islamic Religious Education. Religious education has distinctive aims, including moral formation, spiritual development, and value internalization. Therefore, digital transformation in this field should not be measured only by how often teachers use technology, but by how technology supports students' understanding, reflection, and practice of Islamic values. Policy implementation should also consider regional and school-level differences. In Samarinda City, as shown in this study, teachers' experiences were shaped by variations in infrastructure,

digital competence, and school support. A more context-sensitive policy approach is therefore needed to reduce the gap between national educational expectations and local classroom realities.

This study has several limitations. First, it involved 10 Islamic Religious Education teachers from 10 elementary schools in Samarinda City, East Kalimantan; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized statistically to all elementary schools in Indonesia. Second, the study focused on teachers' experiences and classroom practices, while students' and parents' perspectives were not examined in depth. Third, the research was conducted from January to March 2026, which means that the findings represent teachers' experiences within a specific period and policy context. Fourth, although classroom observations and document analysis were used to strengthen the data, the interpretation of teaching practices remains limited to the observed lessons and available documents. Future research could involve a larger number of schools, compare urban and rural contexts, include students' and parents' perspectives, or use a mixed-methods design to examine the relationship between deep learning practices, character outcomes, and digital learning engagement.

Overall, this study demonstrates that bridging policy and practice in Islamic Religious Education requires more than policy documents, curriculum changes, or digital devices. The findings show that deep learning becomes meaningful when teachers connect religious concepts with students' lived experiences; character-based pedagogy becomes effective when values are modeled, practiced, and reflected in classroom culture; and digital transformation becomes educationally relevant when technology supports moral, cognitive, and spiritual learning goals. The study therefore advances understanding of Islamic Religious Education transformation by showing that teachers are central actors in translating policy into meaningful classroom practice. Their experiences reveal both the possibilities and constraints of implementing deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital transformation in elementary schools.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the transformation of Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools depends on the extent to which policy expectations are meaningfully translated into classroom practice by teachers. The findings show that deep learning, character-based pedagogy, and digital transformation are not separate agendas, but interconnected dimensions of pedagogical change. Deep learning becomes relevant in Islamic Religious Education when it helps students move beyond memorization toward reflection, meaning-making, and the internalization of Islamic values. Character-based pedagogy remains essential because religious learning at the elementary level is closely tied to habituation, moral exemplification, classroom dialogue, and the formation of everyday ethical behavior. Digital transformation contributes to learning when technology is used to strengthen engagement, explanation, assessment, and access to learning resources, but it cannot replace the teacher's role in guiding students' moral and spiritual development. The study also concludes that teachers are central actors in bridging policy and practice. Their agency, professional readiness, digital competence, and contextual understanding determine how educational reforms are enacted in real classrooms. Therefore, improving Islamic Religious Education requires more than curriculum directives or digital infrastructure; it requires sustained teacher professional development, school-level support, and pedagogical guidance that is sensitive to the moral, religious, and developmental needs of elementary students. These conclusions contribute to existing scholarship by demonstrating that meaningful educational transformation in Islamic Religious Education must integrate cognitive depth, character formation, and digital pedagogy within the lived realities of teachers and schools.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to assist with language refinement, translation, academic writing structure, and manuscript editing. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Original draft; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing.

Author 5: Supervision; Validation.

Author 6: Resources; Visualization.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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