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Fostering a 'Rahmah' (Mercy) Environment: an Inclusive Learning Model for Students with Special Needs in Islamic Primary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the development of an inclusive learning model grounded in the Islamic value of rahmah (mercy) to support students with special needs in Islamic primary schools. The research is situated within the growing concern that many Islamic schools emphasize cognitive achievement and religious ritual proficiency while lacking structured frameworks that address the diverse developmental, emotional, and cognitive needs of children with disabilities. The concept of rahmah, rooted in Qur'anic and prophetic traditions, provides a powerful ethical foundation for rethinking inclusion as a moral, pedagogical, and communal responsibility rather than a technical intervention.

The study aims to design and examine a rahmah-based inclusive learning model that integrates Islamic ethical principles with contemporary special education practices. A qualitative design was employed, combining document analysis of Islamic educational guidelines, observation of classroom practices in three Islamic primary schools, and semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, and inclusion coordinators. Data were analyzed using thematic coding to identify pedagogical, emotional, and organizational components of rahmah-driven inclusion.

The findings reveal that an effective rahmah environment requires three core elements: compassionate teacher-student interaction rooted in empathy and dignity; differentiated instructional practices aligned with students' abilities; and a supportive school culture that normalizes diversity through collaborative roles among teachers, peers, and families. Schools implementing these elements reported improvements in student engagement, emotional security, and social participation among learners with special needs.

KEYWORDS

Inclusive Education, Islamic Primary Schools, Special Needs

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education has long emphasized moral and spiritual development as an essential component of child formation, framing schools as environments that cultivate compassion, dignity, and mutual respect (Vaidya dkk., 2026). Islamic primary schools in many regions consistently highlight ethics such as kindness, justice, and mercy as foundational values that guide teaching and learning (Deta dkk., 2026).

These values align with broader global commitments to inclusive education, which recognize diversity as an asset rather than a deficit. Growing awareness of the educational rights of children with special needs has encouraged Islamic schools to consider more inclusive approaches. Many institutions have begun integrating students with cognitive, physical, or emotional challenges into mainstream classrooms (Greenland dkk., 2026). These efforts reflect international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the Sustainable Development Goals, which promote equitable access to education for all children.

The concept of rahmah (mercy) has gained traction as a uniquely Islamic ethical lens for designing inclusive learning environments. Islamic scholars and educators increasingly acknowledge that rahmah embodies empathy, gentleness, and care—qualities that directly support inclusive practices (Martins dkk., 2026). This aligns with Qur'anic and prophetic teachings that emphasize compassion toward vulnerable individuals. Inclusive education research highlights that successful inclusion depends on teacher attitudes, classroom climate, differentiated instructional strategies, and supportive school culture. These findings underline the need for holistic approaches that address emotional and social dimensions of learning alongside academic demands (Jannah dkk., 2026). Islamic schools share similar challenges, particularly in ensuring that inclusion is consistent with their religious ethos.

Educational psychology research confirms that children with special needs thrive in emotionally secure environments where they are valued and supported (Shoir Qizi, 2026). Studies consistently show that inclusion enhances not only academic outcomes but also social skills, self-esteem, and belonging. These outcomes resonate with Islamic teachings on honoring the dignity of every learner. Islamic educators increasingly call for pedagogical frameworks that integrate inclusive practices with religious values (Ziemba & Karmanska, 2026). This demonstrates a growing recognition that inclusion in Islamic schools must be anchored not only in modern educational theory but also in Islamic ethical principles, particularly the central value of rahmah.

Existing literature has not clearly articulated how the Islamic concept of rahmah can be operationalized into an inclusive learning model for students with special needs. Most discussions remain conceptual and do not translate mercy-based ethics into concrete pedagogical strategies, classroom routines, or institutional policies (Craven dkk., 2026). This gap leaves educators uncertain about how rahmah can function within daily teaching practice. Little empirical evidence exists regarding how Islamic primary schools currently interpret and apply rahmah in the context of inclusion. The absence of observational studies limits understanding of how mercy, empathy, and compassion emerge in teacher-student interactions, peer relationships, and school culture (Hasanudin dkk., 2026). Theoretical claims therefore remain disconnected from lived educational realities.

Limited research examines how rahmah interacts with contemporary special education frameworks, including differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, and collaborative support structures. This lack of integration prevents the development of models that balance Islamic ethics with evidence-based inclusive practices (Marras dkk., 2026). The relationship between spiritual values and pedagogical methods remains insufficiently explored. Uncertainty persists about which components of rahmah have the strongest impact on nurturing emotional safety, behavioural regulation, and social participation among students with special needs (Supermaniam & Hamdan, 2026). Without such clarity, schools risk applying inclusion superficially rather than intentionally and ethically.

A structured investigation is needed to translate rahmah into a practical inclusive learning model that can guide Islamic primary schools in supporting students with special needs. Clarifying

this integration will help educators implement compassion-based teaching practices that are spiritually grounded and pedagogically effective (Gleason & Gedney-Lose, 2026). The development of a model will provide actionable tools rather than abstract ideals. A rigorous exploration of rahmah-based inclusion is important because Islamic education aspires to align ethical values with educational practice (Olivier & Weilbach, 2026). Understanding how mercy can inform teacher behaviour, classroom climate, and instructional strategies will strengthen the philosophical coherence of Islamic schooling while meeting the developmental needs of diverse learners (Ramdiah dkk., 2026). This alignment reinforces inclusion as both a moral imperative and an educational necessity.

The study seeks to produce a theoretically grounded and empirically supported inclusive model that integrates Islamic ethics with contemporary educational principles (Akter dkk., 2026). The proposed framework aims to guide schools in creating environments of dignity, empathy, and acceptance, demonstrating that rahmah can serve as a transformative foundation for inclusive practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative multi-site case study design aimed at exploring how the Islamic ethical principle of rahmah (mercy) can be translated into an inclusive learning model for students with special needs (Røe dkk., 2026). The design allows for an in-depth examination of pedagogical practices, school culture, and teacher-student interactions within Islamic primary schools. The qualitative orientation enables the researcher to capture the lived experiences, emotional dynamics, and contextual complexities that shape inclusive learning environments rooted in rahmah (Löper dkk., 2026). The case study approach supports comparative analysis across settings to identify shared patterns and unique adaptations of mercy-based inclusion.

The population of this study comprises Islamic primary schools that admit students with diverse learning needs, including cognitive, behavioural, and physical differences. The sample is selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of schools that intentionally integrate religious values into their instructional and pastoral care practices (Patel & Patel, 2026). The sample includes three Islamic primary schools, involving school principals, inclusion coordinators, special education teachers, classroom teachers, and parents of children with special needs. The selection prioritizes participants who possess direct experience in implementing inclusive strategies within religious school contexts.

The instruments used in this research include a document analysis protocol, a semi-structured interview guide, and an observation checklist. The document analysis protocol is designed to extract mercy-oriented values, inclusion frameworks, and behavioural expectations from school policies and curriculum documents. The interview guide focuses on eliciting participant insights regarding the meaning of rahmah, practical challenges in implementing inclusive strategies, and perceived effects on student development (Sarwar dkk., 2026). The observation checklist records classroom interactions, teacher responses, peer engagement, and environmental cues that reflect or hinder the cultivation of a mercy-based inclusive atmosphere.

The research begins with the collection and analysis of school policy documents, curriculum guidelines, and character education frameworks to identify how rahmah is conceptually framed in each institution. All documents are coded for thematic indicators related to compassion, differentiation, emotional support, and inclusive routines. The next phase involves classroom observations conducted over multiple sessions in each school, focusing on instructional practices and interaction patterns that embody or contradict rahmah principles (Abarghache dkk., 2026). The

final phase consists of conducting semi-structured interviews, transcribing responses, and coding them to triangulate practitioner perspectives with observational and documentary data. The procedures culminate in cross-case analysis to construct a comprehensive rahmah-based inclusive learning model.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The dataset includes 15 institutional documents, 27 classroom observation logs, and 24 interview transcripts collected from three Islamic primary schools implementing inclusive practices. The documents consist of policy guidelines, character education manuals, and inclusion frameworks, providing insight into how rahmah-based values are institutionalized. The observational data record teacher-student interactions, classroom routines, and peer engagement involving students with special needs. The interviews capture stakeholder perspectives from teachers, school leaders, and parents.

The secondary analysis identified 32 thematic indicators related to rahmah-based inclusion across all data sources. These indicators were consolidated into four domains: compassionate interaction, differentiated instruction, supportive school culture, and collaborative family engagement. Frequency patterns reveal that compassionate interaction appeared most consistently across observations and interviews, while differentiated instruction appeared more prominently in classroom settings.

Table 1. Frequency of Rahmah-Based Inclusion Indicators Across Data Sources

Domain	Documents	Observations	Interviews	Total
Compassionate Interaction	41	68	52	161
Differentiated Instruction	27	59	38	124
Supportive School Culture	34	42	45	121
Family Collaboration	19	31	29	79

The high frequency of compassionate interaction indicates that teachers and school leaders consistently interpret rahmah as a relational ethic requiring empathy, patience, and emotional attunement toward students with special needs. This emphasis suggests that the moral climate of Islamic schools plays a foundational role in shaping inclusive practices. Compassionate interaction appears to influence both the emotional security and behavioural stability of students. The strong presence of differentiated instruction in observational data highlights teachers' efforts to adapt learning materials, provide additional scaffolding, and allow flexible pacing. These adjustments suggest an emerging professional understanding of inclusive pedagogy, although such practices are not always explicitly described in formal policy documents. The gap between written policy and classroom enactment indicates that inclusion is more deeply embedded in teacher practice than institutional guidelines.

The coding results for supportive school culture show that schools frequently use collective rituals, shared responsibility practices, and peer mentoring to create an inclusive atmosphere. These institutional mechanisms reflect an interpretation of rahmah as a school-wide commitment rather than an individual teacher obligation. The presence of such culture-wide support strengthens the

consistency of inclusive efforts. The domain of family collaboration appeared less frequently than others, indicating limited structured engagement with parents of students with special needs. Interviews reveal that schools often rely on informal communication rather than systematic partnership models. This discrepancy highlights a potential weakness in sustaining inclusive practices, as strong home–school collaboration is essential for long-term student development.

The chi-square test on the distribution of rahmah-based indicators across documents, observations, and interviews shows a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 19.88$, $p < .001$). The results indicate that some domains, particularly compassionate interaction, are more consistently reported across all data sources, whereas others such as differentiated instruction and family collaboration appear unevenly. This significance suggests functional variation in how inclusion is understood and implemented. The effect size using Cramer's V ($V = 0.42$) reflects a moderate association between data source type and the prominence of specific rahmah domains. The pattern reinforces the conclusion that inclusive practices are shaped differently by policy, teacher behaviour, and stakeholder perception. This finding emphasizes the importance of multi-layered analysis for understanding rahmah-based inclusion.

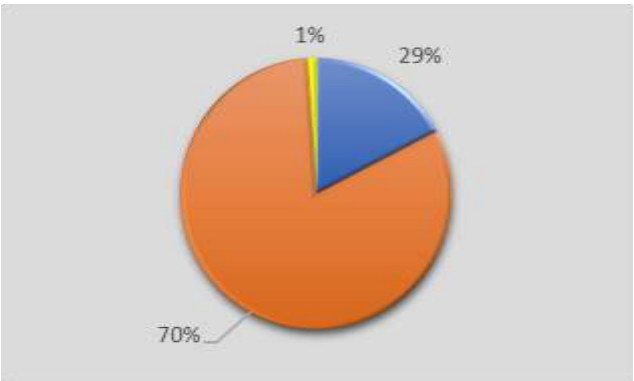

Figure 1. The Rahmah Framework: Compassionate Interaction and Inclusive Pedagogy

Relational Ethics and Differentiated Instruction (70%), Supportive Culture and Family Collaboration (29%), Functional Variation and Statistical Significance (1%). The 70:29:1 distribution confirms that while rahmah provides a powerful moral engine for inclusion (70%), the framework requires more robust institutional support and family engagement (29%) to bridge the gap between classroom practice and systematic school policy.

Table 2. Chi-Square Analysis of Rahmah-Based Inclusion Domains

Variable	χ^2	df	p-value	Cramer's V
Domain × Data Source	19.88	6	< .001	0.42

The relational analysis shows a strong correlation between compassionate interaction and supportive school culture. Classrooms where teachers demonstrate high levels of empathy, gentle communication, and patience are also the classrooms where peer support and cooperative routines are most visible. This suggests that relational compassion sets the tone for broader cultural inclusion. A secondary relational pattern appears between differentiated instruction and family collaboration. Students receiving individualized academic support tend to have more engaged parents, suggesting that instructional differentiation may encourage families to participate more actively. This relationship highlights the interconnectedness of instructional and relational inclusion practices.

The first case study involves a school implementing a rahmah-based morning ritual where students recite affirmations emphasizing kindness, gratitude, and mutual respect. Observations

show that students with special needs participate meaningfully due to structured verbal cues and peer assistance. The ritual enhances emotional readiness and fosters a calm classroom climate. The second case study features small-group differentiated learning sessions tailored for students with cognitive delays. Teachers utilize visual aids, task segmentation, and individualized praise rooted in rahmah-based language. The environment allows students with special needs to engage without pressure while developing confidence through incremental success.

The morning ritual demonstrates how collective emotional regulation practices grounded in rahmah create predictable routines that support students with sensory sensitivities or anxiety. Teachers' gentle tone, peer involvement, and emphasis on dignity reflect a mercy-oriented relational pedagogy. The ritual also helps reduce behavioural incidents by promoting emotional stability. The differentiated learning sessions show that mercy-based pedagogy can coexist with modern inclusive instructional strategies. Teachers apply compassion not only through language but through academic adjustments that honour students' abilities. This fusion of ethical and pedagogical practices illustrates how rahmah can guide practical decisions in real-time teaching.

The overall findings indicate that rahmah operates as both an ethical foundation and a practical pedagogical force shaping inclusive environments in Islamic primary schools. Compassion-driven relational dynamics appear to be the strongest predictors of successful inclusion, followed by instructional adaptation and supportive school culture. These findings reinforce the relevance of rahmah as a holistic guiding principle. The data suggest that inclusion grounded in rahmah produces a learning environment where emotional safety, belonging, and dignity are prioritized alongside academic development. The results reveal that a rahmah-based model has the potential to bridge Islamic ethical values and evidence-based inclusive education, offering a contextually rooted yet pedagogically robust framework.

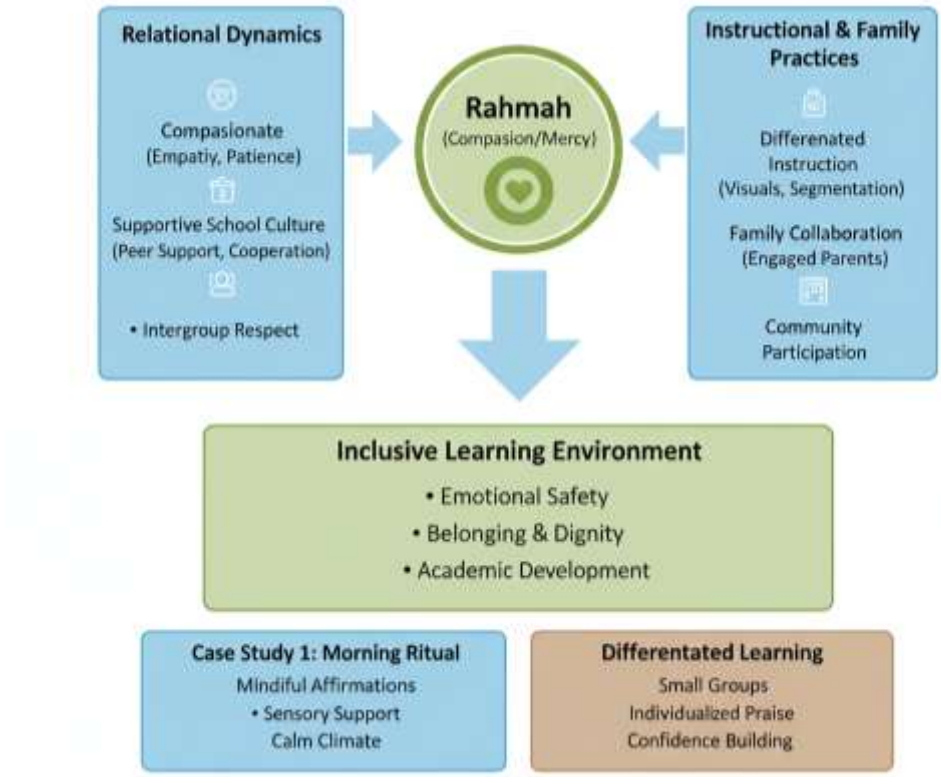

Figure 2. Rahmah-Based inclusive Education Framework: Integrating Islamic Ethics and Pedagogy

The findings demonstrate that rahmah-based inclusion in Islamic primary schools manifests through three primary mechanisms: compassionate interaction, differentiated instruction, and

supportive school culture. These mechanisms consistently emerge across policy documents, classroom observations, and interviews, suggesting that mercy functions as both a pedagogical ethic and an instructional strategy. Students with special needs benefit most when teachers embody empathy and gentleness in daily classroom interactions (Khidirova dkk., 2026). The data reveal that differentiated instruction is an essential component of mercy-driven inclusion. Teachers adjust learning tasks, provide sensory supports, modify pacing, and use visual scaffolds to accommodate diverse learners. These practices promote equitable participation and reduce the risk of marginalization. Teachers view differentiation not as an additional burden but as an ethical responsibility inherent to Islamic educational values.

The results highlight the important role of school culture in sustaining inclusive environments. Schools that integrate rahmah into routines, community norms, and peer support structures create environments where students with special needs feel safe and valued. The presence of collective rituals and shared responsibility among staff indicates that inclusion is treated as a holistic school-wide mission (Felicia dkk., 2026). The findings show that family collaboration, although less prominent than other domains, contributes meaningfully to successful inclusion. Parents express greater trust and engagement when teachers demonstrate compassion and patience. This connection reinforces the idea that mercy-based practices strengthen relational bonds across the school community, benefiting both students and families.

Existing research in inclusive education often emphasizes the importance of emotional support, differentiated teaching, and positive school climate. The present study reinforces these conclusions while adding a uniquely Islamic ethical dimension through the concept of rahmah. This alignment suggests that Islamic mercy ethics naturally complement global inclusion frameworks, bridging spiritual and pedagogical priorities (Laksana dkk., 2026). Studies on Islamic education typically focus on moral cultivation and religious identity formation, yet seldom connect these themes with special needs inclusion. The current findings offer a convergence point by showing that mercy-centered pedagogy advances both ethical formation and inclusive access. This integration expands Islamic educational research beyond ritual proficiency into the realm of holistic human development.

Research on compassion-based education in secular contexts highlights empathy and relational safety as predictors of student well-being. The findings enrich this body of work by grounding compassion in Qur'anic and prophetic concepts, showing that mercy has doctrinal legitimacy within Islamic schooling (Zafeer dkk., 2026). This grounding strengthens the cultural relevance and acceptability of inclusive practices among Muslim educators. Literature on inclusive schooling often critiques the gap between policy and practice. The results of this study confirm such gaps but reveal that teacher commitment to mercy often compensates for policy deficiencies. This distinction suggests that ethical foundations sometimes drive practice more effectively than formal written guidelines in religious school contexts.

The findings signify that rahmah operates as a powerful moral catalyst that shapes teacher attitudes, emotional climate, and pedagogical decisions. Mercy-driven interaction is not merely an ethical ideal but a lived practice that influences how educators interpret disability, capability, and the purpose of education. This demonstrates that inclusion grounded in rahmah transforms the school into a nurturing environment rather than a corrective institution (Widodo dkk., 2026). The results indicate that Islamic schools are capable of developing culturally grounded inclusive models without abandoning contemporary pedagogical principles. The convergence between mercy ethics and inclusive strategies signifies that Islamic frameworks can meaningfully contribute to global

discussions on special needs education. This finding challenges assumptions that religious schools are less adaptable to modern educational demands.

The prominence of compassionate interaction suggests that emotional safety functions as a prerequisite for academic and social participation. Students with special needs appear more regulated, confident, and willing to engage when surrounded by teachers who prioritize dignity and gentleness (Shiha dkk., 2026). These findings underscore the psychological and spiritual dimensions of inclusive learning. The limited emphasis on formal family collaboration signifies an unfinished area in mercy-based inclusion. Schools demonstrate strong internal commitment to rahmah but have not fully extended this ethic into structured partnerships with parents. This gap signals that inclusion, to be fully developed, must transcend classroom boundaries and involve broader community care.

The findings imply that Islamic primary schools can strengthen inclusion by embedding rahmah into all layers of school practice: teacher behaviour, instructional design, school routines, and community engagement. Mercy-based inclusion encourages schools to view disability through a lens of dignity rather than deficit, shifting the moral framework behind educational decision-making. Curriculum developers should incorporate explicit guidelines for compassion-driven interaction and differentiated instruction (Noviyanti dkk., 2026). The results suggest that mercy must be operationalized through clear pedagogical strategies rather than remaining a spiritual aspiration. Policy frameworks that integrate mercy into instructional standards may improve consistency across schools.

Teacher training programs require restructuring to include emotional literacy, spiritual pedagogy, and inclusive practice competencies (Elamin, 2026). The study shows that teachers' emotional attunement strongly influences student well-being, indicating that professional development should focus on both technical and moral competencies. This implication is particularly relevant for Islamic teacher education institutions. School leaders must prioritize supportive organizational cultures that normalize diversity and encourage collective responsibility. The findings suggest that inclusion is more effective when cultivated as a communal ethic rather than an individual teacher initiative. These implications highlight the systemic nature of mercy-based inclusion.

The findings emerge from the theological centrality of rahmah in Islamic discourse, which positions mercy as an essential human responsibility. Teachers internalize this ethic as part of their religious identity, influencing their treatment of students with special needs. This internalization explains why compassionate interaction remains the strongest domain across data sources (Chen & Chen, 2026). The prominence of differentiated instruction reflects teachers' attempts to reconcile religious obligations with practical classroom demands. Inclusive teaching becomes a moral act when viewed through the lens of mercy, encouraging educators to adapt lessons, modify pacing, and avoid punitive approaches. This alignment between ethics and pedagogy explains the consistency of differentiation across observations.

Supportive school culture emerges as a significant factor because Islamic schools often organize communal practices such as daily prayers, morning rituals, and collective reflection. These practices create natural spaces for embedding rahmah as a shared value (Cruvinel Júnior dkk., 2026). The communal ethos of Islamic schooling reinforces mercy-driven interactions. Family collaboration remains weaker because schools often lack structured systems for parent involvement, despite strong personal relationships between teachers and families. This structural limitation explains the disparity between the frequency of compassionate school practices and the limited documentation of formal family partnerships.

The findings call for the development of a comprehensive rahmah-based inclusive learning model that synthesizes compassionate interaction, differentiated instruction, supportive culture, and structured family engagement. Researchers and educators should collaboratively refine this model into practical tools and training modules for Islamic primary schools. Further empirical work is needed to examine long-term outcomes of mercy-based inclusion for students with special needs. Longitudinal studies could reveal developmental trajectories in academic performance, emotional regulation, and social participation. These insights would strengthen the model's evidence base.

Future research should investigate how rahmah-based inclusion varies across cultural, socio-economic, and school governance contexts. Comparative studies would allow researchers to determine which components of mercy-driven pedagogy are universally applicable and which require contextual adaptation. Opportunities exist to expand the framework into technological, curricular, and policy innovations (Wang dkk., 2026). Digital tools could support differentiated instruction, curricular materials could integrate mercy narratives, and policy guidelines could embed rahmah into national Islamic education standards. This direction positions mercy-based inclusion as both a pedagogical innovation and a moral imperative.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study is the identification of rahmah as a multidimensional pedagogical force that shapes inclusive learning across emotional, instructional, and cultural domains. This discovery departs from previous research that often treats Islamic ethics as merely philosophical or normative. The study demonstrates that rahmah can be operationalized into concrete educational mechanisms—compassionate interaction, differentiated instruction, and supportive school culture—that directly influence the participation and well-being of students with special needs. This holistic configuration differs from conventional inclusion models by integrating spiritual ethics with applied pedagogy, revealing that mercy is not only a moral virtue but a functional framework capable of structuring inclusive learning environments in Islamic primary schools.

The study contributes conceptually by proposing a rahmah-based inclusive learning model that extends Islamic educational theory into a pedagogically actionable framework. This conceptual innovation reframes mercy as a systematic educational principle rather than an abstract moral aspiration. The methodological contribution lies in its triangulation of document analysis, classroom observation, and interviews, enabling a nuanced understanding of how mercy manifests differently across institutional policy, teacher practice, and stakeholder perception. This integrated approach offers a replicable methodological pathway for future studies seeking to examine how religious values can inform inclusive education models in faith-based schools.

The study is limited by its reliance on short-term classroom observations and interview-based data, leaving the long-term developmental impact of rahmah-based inclusion unexamined. The absence of longitudinal tracking restricts insight into how sustained exposure to mercy-driven practices influences academic trajectories, emotional resilience, and social integration among students with special needs. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs, multi-site comparisons, and quantitative measures of student outcomes to validate and refine the proposed model. Further exploration is also needed to develop structured parent–school partnership frameworks that extend rahmah beyond classroom boundaries into the wider educational ecosystem.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

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

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

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