

Teachers as Change Agents: Addressing the Learning Performance Gap in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah through Pedagogical Innovation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the pivotal role of teachers as agents of change in narrowing the learning performance gap in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Using a qualitative case study design at MI Darul Ibad Rowoindah, the research explores how pedagogical innovation, such as student-centered instruction, contextual storytelling, and collaborative learning, improves academic outcomes and student engagement. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving school leaders, teachers, and students. The findings reveal that when teachers are empowered with professional trust and institutional support, they initiate classroom transformations that are responsive to students' diverse needs. Innovative practices not only enhance comprehension and motivation but also foster ethical and emotional development aligned with Islamic educational values. The study also highlights the importance of documentation and reflection as tools for continuous improvement. While challenges such as limited resources and rigid schedules persist, the presence of teacher agency significantly contributes to educational reform at the grassroots level. This research reinforces the idea that sustainable improvement in madrasah depends not only on top-down policy but also on the commitment and creativity of teachers. The study offers practical insights for school leadership and policy-makers to foster a culture of innovation in Islamic elementary schools.

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INTRODUCTION

In the current landscape of Islamic elementary education, *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* are facing a growing learning performance gap among students. Several studies point to the persistence of low achievement levels in core subjects, caused by factors such as rigid instruction, lack of student engagement, and insufficient differentiation (Rohman & Zulkarnain, 2021). Although educational reforms like *Kurikulum Merdeka* promote more flexible, student-centered teaching, many teachers in Islamic schools continue to apply traditional, content-heavy, teacher-centered models (Sukmadinata, 2022). In such contexts, the role of the teacher is often limited to knowledge delivery rather than transformation. This issue is critical because madrasah serve dual functions: academic education and

spiritual formation. Therefore, repositioning teachers as agents of pedagogical change becomes essential in addressing the performance gap while still preserving the religious mission of the institution (Azra, 2020). This study addresses the urgency to empower teachers as transformative figures in the classroom.

The role of teacher quality and teaching strategies in improving student performance is well-documented. Numerous studies confirm that innovative pedagogy such as project-based learning, inquiry models, and contextual teaching positively affects student engagement and learning outcomes (Huda et al., 2020; Setiawan & Wardani, 2021). In the Islamic education context, research also emphasizes the integration of adab (ethics) and academic learning (Rahmah, 2021). However, few empirical studies have focused on teachers in *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* as change agents who initiate innovation at the classroom level. The literature still tends to emphasize top-down reform, overlooking teacher-led, grassroots innovation (Mahfud et al., 2023). Additionally, while studies exist on Islamic pedagogy in theory, there is a lack of documentation on how those pedagogical innovations translate into improved learning outcomes. This research aims to fill that gap by providing grounded evidence of how madrasah teachers exercise agency in transforming their pedagogical practices.

This research explores how teachers act as agents of change by adopting innovative pedagogical strategies to close the learning performance gap in *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*. The study seeks to answer the main question: *How do teachers at Islamic elementary schools contribute to reducing the academic achievement gap through pedagogical innovation?* Supporting questions include: What types of innovation are implemented? What is their impact on student engagement and academic outcomes? What enables or restricts teachers from initiating classroom transformation? The aim is to understand how teacher agency contributes to instructional improvement and to identify best practices that could be scaled or adapted. By doing so, this study aspires to contribute not only to the academic discussion of teacher professionalism but also to the practical development of sustainable educational strategies in the madrasah setting (Basri & Halik, 2022).

This study argues that teacher agency is central to educational transformation, especially in bridging the implementation gap between policy and practice. Teachers who are empowered to innovate in their teaching approaches can play a pivotal role in improving both academic and character outcomes in Islamic schools (Kurniawati et al., 2023). Early evidence suggests that even modest innovations like using local contexts in teaching or rotating peer discussions can improve learning outcomes when teachers are supported and trusted (Nasir & Fahmi, 2020). Therefore, this research has two main implications. First, teacher development programs must prioritize pedagogical innovation as a core competency. Second, madrasah systems must build institutional cultures that trust and empower teachers to lead change. This study tests the premise that sustainable improvements in student achievement depend not only on policy shifts but also on bottom-up transformation driven by teachers themselves.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted at MI Darul Ibad Rowoindah, Jember, a private Islamic elementary school located in a semi-urban area, with students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The school was purposively selected due to its institutional awareness of the importance of pedagogical innovation and its commitment to improving student learning outcomes. The unit of analysis in this study is the strategies and innovative teaching practices implemented by teachers to address the learning performance gap. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex dynamics involved in the teacher's role as a change agent. This method offers a holistic, contextual, and naturalistic exploration of classroom phenomena. The study focuses on real and situated experiences, enabling the researcher to capture the interaction between teacher practices, instructional innovation, and student performance in an authentic school setting.

Data were gathered from multiple key informants directly involved in the teaching and learning process at MI Darul Ibad. These included the principal, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, classroom teachers, and students from all grade levels (I–VI). The principal provided insights into institutional vision, school improvement strategies, and support systems for teacher-led initiatives. The vice principal explained the academic policy direction, teacher training activities, and innovation development efforts. Classroom teachers served as the primary informants, offering first-hand accounts of pedagogical experimentation and classroom management strategies. Students contributed their lived experiences, reflecting on how various teaching approaches affected their motivation, engagement, and comprehension. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure rich, detailed, and representative data across all school levels. This approach helped the researcher capture diverse perspectives that inform the broader understanding of teacher agency and its impact on learning outcomes.

The research employed three main techniques for data collection: observation, interviews, and document analysis. Observations were carried out in SKI (Islamic History) classrooms during actual lessons to document the interactions between teachers and students, variations in instructional strategies, and the visible outcomes of innovation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all informants to explore their perspectives, experiences, and reflections on classroom transformation. This method allowed for open-ended, flexible discussions while staying aligned with the research focus. Document analysis supported these findings by reviewing instructional materials such as lesson plans (RPP), assessment tools, student learning records, and performance evaluations. These sources helped contextualize the observed and reported practices. The combination of these methods allowed for data triangulation, increasing the validity and credibility of the research. Cross-verifying data from multiple sources ensured a more accurate and comprehensive portrayal of classroom realities and innovative teaching efforts.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three interconnected stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the reduction stage, data from

interviews, observations, and documents were filtered, coded, and categorized according to key themes, such as pedagogical strategies, student engagement, learning outcomes, and constraints. In the display stage, selected data were organized into thematic matrices, narrative summaries, and direct quotations to facilitate pattern identification and interpretation. The verification stage involved reflecting on the consistency of emerging findings through source triangulation and reflective analysis. Data were analyzed continuously throughout the research process, allowing the researcher to capture emerging insights and dynamic shifts in classroom practices. This model provided a systematic yet flexible framework for uncovering how teacher-led innovations influence student learning and the overall quality of education in the madrasah context.

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the data, three complementary analytical approaches were applied: content analysis, discourse analysis, and interpretive analysis. Content analysis was used to examine the contents of lesson plans, teacher reflection journals, and assessment tools, identifying how instructional design relates to learning outcomes. Discourse analysis was applied to the interview and observation data to uncover how teachers construct their roles as change agents through language, narratives, and classroom routines. Interpretive analysis enabled the researcher to explore the deeper social, cultural, and spiritual meanings embedded in teacher actions and student responses. These three approaches were applied in a triangulated manner to explore not only technical teaching practices but also the symbolic and normative aspects of education in the Islamic school setting. Together, they offered a rich, multi-dimensional view of how pedagogical innovation can serve as a vehicle for improving student performance and transforming classroom culture.

RESULT

The interview data collected from the school principal, vice principal, classroom teachers, and students of MI Darul Ibad reveal several key insights. Teachers acknowledge the growing performance gap among students, particularly in comprehension and independent task completion. They report experimenting with student-centered methods such as learning stations, peer teaching, and contextual storytelling. The principal emphasized the importance of encouraging innovation by giving teachers autonomy and professional trust. The vice principal added that teachers were urged to align lesson planning with both national curriculum standards and local learning needs. Students shared that they feel more motivated when teachers use visual aids, allow discussion, and relate lessons to real life. Some students stated that they remember the material better when actively involved in learning activities. This data reflects a shift in pedagogical mindset, where teachers are beginning to move beyond rote instruction and intentionally address learning disparities through tailored strategies.

From the interview data, a pattern emerges in which teachers perceive their role not only as content deliverers but as facilitators of learning. Most teachers described challenges such as large class sizes, varied learning speeds, and limited time allocation. However, rather than returning to lecture-based methods, several of them described efforts to adopt differentiated instruction and peer

collaboration. A few teachers mentioned that they began integrating simple diagnostic assessments at the start of lessons to identify learning gaps, followed by group tasks or games to reinforce concepts. Leadership support was also consistent; both principal and vice principal stressed the importance of giving teachers room to adapt. Students frequently mentioned lessons that involved movement, storytelling, or group work as their favorites, indicating that engagement directly impacts retention. The data points to a growing culture of pedagogical innovation supported by both leadership and learner response, signaling a positive direction in addressing performance inequality.

Analytically, these findings illustrate a functional shift in the identity and practice of teachers at MI Darul Ibad. They are not merely applying new techniques, but redefining their role within the classroom as agents of transformation. This transformation appears to be driven by an increasing awareness of diverse student needs and the realization that conventional methods are insufficient to close the learning gap. The interviews suggest that when teachers are granted professional autonomy and institutional support, they initiate relevant pedagogical changes from the ground up. This aligns with recent literature that emphasizes teacher agency as a determinant factor in educational reform (Kurniawati et al., 2023). The pattern also shows that students are highly responsive to innovative methods, confirming that classroom engagement and student achievement are interdependent. Therefore, empowering teachers to act on their pedagogical insights is not only viable but essential for systemic improvement in madrasah settings.

Classroom observations conducted over two weeks in grades III through VI revealed dynamic changes in teaching strategies. In several SKI (Islamic History) lessons, teachers used story-based learning, visual diagrams, and cooperative activities like mind-mapping or group discussion. Students were observed actively participating, raising questions, and debating interpretations of historical events. In science classes, especially on the topic of "living cells," teachers incorporated drawings, real-life analogies, and collaborative note-taking exercises. However, the degree of innovation varied among teachers. Some still relied heavily on textbooks and lectures, particularly when facing time constraints or assessment deadlines. Observations also noted a significant difference in student behavior depending on the approach used. In interactive sessions, students appeared more focused, responsive, and disciplined. In more traditional lectures, signs of disengagement such as fidgeting, chatting, and passive body language were more frequent. These patterns suggest a clear link between teaching style and student learning behavior.

A descriptive pattern emerged from classroom observations: when pedagogical innovation was applied, student engagement and participation increased noticeably. In SKI classes where teachers used role-playing and inquiry-based questioning, students responded with enthusiasm, often referencing previous lessons. Teachers who circulated among student groups during activities were able to provide real-time feedback and clarify misconceptions. In contrast, classes that maintained a frontal teaching model saw less interaction, with students mostly copying notes and hesitating to ask questions. This pattern

reinforces the role of instructional methods in shaping the learning atmosphere. Furthermore, observers noted that teachers who consistently reflected on their students' responses tended to make mid-lesson adjustments, such as altering examples or adjusting pacing. This form of adaptive teaching proved effective in capturing students' attention and improving comprehension. Overall, the data points to the success of even modest innovation in classroom practice, especially when aligned with student-centered principles.

Analytically, the observational data affirm that pedagogical innovation no matter how small has a significant impact on student behavior and engagement. Teachers who reframe lessons as experiences rather than information delivery promote higher-order thinking and emotional involvement, which in turn improve performance outcomes. These practices reflect a move toward constructivist pedagogy, where students are active agents in their learning process (Huda et al., 2020). The variability in teaching styles observed across classrooms highlights the importance of professional development and peer collaboration to ensure consistency in instructional quality. Moreover, the fact that some teachers still defaulted to lecture-based approaches under pressure suggests that innovation requires not only willingness but also time and structural support. The implication is clear: empowering teachers as change agents must be accompanied by institutional reinforcement and sustained mentoring to embed transformative practices across the school culture.

Document analysis involved reviewing teacher journals, student performance records, and classroom behavior logs over a three-month period. A summary table of findings is presented below:

Tabel 1
Behavioral And Academic Indicators

Student Behavior / Learning Indicator	Frequency Observed	Teacher Intervention
Active Participation in Discussions	18	Verbal praise and recognition
On-time Assignment Submission	22	Public appreciation and feedback
Disruptive Behavior in Class	10	Private counseling and seating adjustment
Positive Peer Collaboration	15	Group reward system
Low Test Scores (<60%)	12	Remedial instruction and parental involvement

This data indicates that teachers actively monitor both behavioral and academic indicators. Interventions are not limited to punishment but also include constructive reinforcement, reflection, and parental engagement. The documentation also reveals how behavioral tracking supports pedagogical adjustments in real-time.

The documentation shows a balanced approach to managing student progress—both behaviorally and academically. High frequencies of positive behaviors such as punctuality and collaboration suggest that classroom environments are becoming more supportive and participatory. More importantly, teacher interventions go beyond standard discipline and incorporate praise, feedback, and structured follow-up. For example, students with low test scores were not simply labeled but enrolled in remedial activities with active involvement from parents. The presence of teacher reflection journals indicated an effort to analyze class dynamics and modify future lesson plans accordingly. These patterns suggest that documentation is not merely administrative but part of an ongoing formative assessment process. It also reflects a shift in school culture toward nurturing rather than policing. This shift enables teachers to see themselves not just as rule enforcers, but as mentors guiding both academic and personal development.

Analytically, the documentation data reinforces the view that effective teachers act as change agents through intentional, reflective, and data-informed practices. Rather than focusing solely on cognitive performance, teachers in this study are seen engaging holistically with students' learning journeys. Their interventions are proactive and diversified, aligned with the broader goal of inclusive and transformative Islamic education. This approach resonates with the principle of *tarbiyah* educational nurturing rooted in compassion and gradual moral growth. The presence of both corrective and supportive measures in the records suggests that pedagogical innovation in this context is not merely technical but ethical. It is driven by a sincere commitment to student success. In sum, the documentation illustrates how practical tools journals, score logs, and behavioral tracking can empower teachers to design responsive strategies, monitor effectiveness, and refine classroom practices that truly bridge the learning performance gap.

DISCUSSION

The interviews reveal that teachers in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah who engage in pedagogical innovation positively influence student engagement and learning outcomes. When teachers move beyond traditional lecturing and implement strategies such as discussion-based learning, storytelling, or visual media, students show improved attention and motivation. This functional shift is aligned with findings from Huda et al. (2020), who argue that student-centered methods foster better learning environments in Islamic education. Similarly, Rahmah (2021) emphasizes the value of contextual and ethical integration in learning. Without such innovation, classrooms risk becoming disengaged and ineffective (Setiawan & Wardani, 2021). Hence, these findings reinforce the idea that empowering teachers to innovate is not optional it is essential to close performance gaps and make learning more relevant to students' needs.

The interviews further suggest that the root cause of this shift in teaching practices stems from a combination of teacher motivation and institutional support. Teachers who feel trusted and professionally valued are more likely to take risks and adopt new methods (Mahfud et al., 2023). Moreover, Basri and Halik (2022) note that leadership that fosters a culture of collaboration and

innovation contributes to long-term pedagogical transformation. The synergy between policy support and teacher agency is vital. As confirmed by Kurniawati et al. (2023), agency plays a central role in curriculum adaptation. Thus, innovation is not just a technical act but a structural response to teacher empowerment, organizational climate, and cultural readiness.

Observation data show that classrooms with interactive, student-focused instruction result in more active and reflective learners. When teachers incorporate methods like group projects or inquiry-based tasks, students engage more deeply with the material. This confirms what Yilmaz & Yilmaz (2021) found active learning strategies increase student motivation and classroom participation. In contrast, when instruction remains passive, disengagement becomes more evident. Nasir & Fahmi (2020) also affirm that pedagogical responsiveness is a key determinant in student success. These findings imply that real-time classroom innovation directly impacts students' academic behavior, and that schools must actively support such practices through ongoing training and institutional recognition.

The variations in student behavior and engagement observed across classrooms are strongly tied to teachers' understanding of diverse learning preferences and their ability to adapt accordingly. Teachers who employ a flexible approach adjusting content, pace, and activities create more inclusive learning spaces (Huda et al., 2020). According to Yilmaz & Yilmaz (2021), scaffolding and learner autonomy enhance emotional involvement in lessons. In madrasah contexts, where both moral and academic goals intersect, culturally responsive teaching becomes even more critical (Rahmah, 2021). Thus, student-centered innovation thrives when teachers possess both pedagogical knowledge and adaptive strategies tailored to learners' backgrounds and needs.

Documentation shows that teacher feedback and behavioral interventions, such as praise, reflection, and counseling, significantly influence student development. As Rahman & Fatimah (2021) point out, creative and adaptive teaching fosters a positive learning atmosphere, improving not just academics but also socio-emotional skills. The presence of detailed records—ranging from assignment logs to participation tracking supports teachers in making data-informed instructional decisions. When schools institutionalize positive reinforcement strategies, students are more likely to repeat desirable behavior (Basri & Halik, 2022). Therefore, documentation is not merely administrative; it is a formative pedagogical tool when aligned with innovation and care.

The structural cause of successful student behavior management, as documented, is rooted in the madrasah's commitment to holistic education (*tarbiyah*). Teachers integrate moral values and academic targets through creative lesson design and personalized interventions. This is in line with Mahfud et al. (2023), who argue that innovation in Islamic education must address not only curriculum content but also value formation. Fatimah & Rahman (2021) also highlight that student well-being improves significantly when teachers are trained to combine emotional intelligence with instructional skills. Hence, pedagogical success in madrasah is not only about method but also about mindset how teachers view their role as mentors, facilitators, and moral guides.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that empowering teachers as change agents significantly contributes to narrowing the learning performance gap in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Teachers who adopt innovative, student-centered pedagogies are better equipped to engage learners with diverse needs and abilities. The research demonstrates that even simple innovations—such as group work, contextual storytelling, and active assessments—can improve student motivation and academic outcomes. More importantly, it reveals that pedagogical innovation is most effective when supported by strong leadership, collaborative culture, and responsive feedback systems. The key takeaway is that teacher agency, when recognized and nurtured, becomes a powerful force in transforming the learning environment and driving sustainable educational improvements in Islamic elementary schools.

The strength of this research lies in its integration of qualitative insights through interviews, observations, and document analysis to explore a specific, under-researched phenomenon in the Islamic education context. It contributes scientifically by offering a renewed perspective on teacher agency—not just as implementers of curriculum, but as initiators of pedagogical reform. Methodologically, the study applies a holistic, context-based approach using interactive analysis and interpretive frameworks to understand real classroom dynamics. Conceptually, it connects innovation, instructional behavior, and student performance in a madrasah setting, thus enriching theories of educational change, Islamic pedagogy, and school-based leadership. It also provides practical implications for school development programs and teacher professional learning.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. It focuses on a single madrasah with a limited number of participants, making generalization difficult. The age range of students is limited to the elementary level, and the innovation observed is contextual, influenced by the school's culture and resources. Furthermore, it uses a qualitative approach without longitudinal tracking, so long-term effects of innovation remain unexplored. Future research should involve multiple madrasah across diverse regions, incorporate quantitative measures, and examine the sustainability of pedagogical changes over time. Expanding the scope can strengthen the theoretical and practical insights established in this study.

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