



Strengthening Teachers' Pedagogical Understanding of Love-Based Curriculum in Islamic Education Contexts

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the need for a more humanistic educational approach in responding to students' social dynamics within Islamic education settings. Existing curricula tend to emphasize cognitive aspects and have not fully integrated affective dimensions based on values of compassion and love. This study aims to analyze the improvement of teachers' understanding and pedagogical competence in implementing a love-based curriculum. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed in this research. Data were collected through observations of training activities, analysis of teachers' lesson plans, and documentation of limited implementation practices. The data were then analyzed using a descriptive-interpretive technique. The findings indicate an improvement in teachers' conceptual understanding of the love-based curriculum, reflected in their ability to design more empathetic, participatory, and positive reinforcement-oriented learning activities. Teachers also demonstrated a shift toward more reflective pedagogical practices, emphasizing warm and meaningful educational relationships. These findings suggest that a love-based curriculum has the potential to serve as a strategic approach in strengthening character education and fostering more meaningful pedagogical relationships within Islamic education contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century education is confronted with a profound paradox. On the one hand, technological advancement and access to information have reached an unprecedented level; on the other hand, the world is witnessing an increasing humanitarian crisis, ranging from moral degradation, intolerance, and violence (bullying) in educational environments to the decline of empathy and social concern (Jeynes, 2019; UNESCO, 2025). This phenomenon indicates a failure of the education system to address and shape the most fundamental aspects of human beings, namely the heart and character. Education is often trapped in a mechanistic paradigm that prioritizes standardization, competition, and cognitive achievement,

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while neglecting the affective and spiritual dimensions that form the foundation of holistic human development (*insan kamil*) (Halik et al., 2025; McKay & Barton, 2018).

National education, and Islamic education in particular, faces multidimensional challenges, not only in achieving cognitive competencies but also in shaping students' character and noble morality (Arif et al., 2023; Maretha et al., 2024). The phenomena of moral degradation, intolerance, and violence in education indicate the presence of a missing link in learning practices, namely the lack of fundamental human values such as compassion (*mahabbah*), empathy (*ta'atbujf*), and care (*ri'ayah*) (Noddings, 2013; Al-Attas, 2019). The concept of a love-based curriculum emerges as a response to this condition by emphasizing that educational processes must be grounded in warm pedagogical relationships, recognition of students' dignity, and meaningful learning experiences (Engkizar et al., 2019; Joseph et al., 2020).

In the context of education in Indonesia, these challenges become more complex due to cultural, religious, and socio-economic diversity. The national curriculum, although it has evolved through the strengthening of character education and the Pancasila student profile, is often implemented in a fragmented manner as an additional program rather than as a core value integrated into every classroom interaction and learning practice (Baroud et al., 2025; Engkizar, Jaafar, Hamzah, Syafril, Febriani, et al., 2026; M et al., 2026). Teachers, as the frontline of education, frequently face administrative burdens and dense curriculum demands, limiting their capacity to build deep pedagogical relationships with students (Junaidi, 2023). As a result, the learning process tends to be transactional rather than transformational.

The concept of a Love-Based Curriculum emerges as a critical and constructive response to these conditions. This curriculum is not merely understood as a teaching method or technique, but as an educational paradigm that places love, care, and empathy as the central principles driving the entire educational process (Alouzi et al., 2026; Defriyanto et al., 2026; Kassymova et al., 2025). In this context, love is not interpreted as a mere emotional feeling, but as an ethical and pedagogical commitment to recognize, respect, and facilitate the optimal development of students' potential with attentiveness and warmth. From the perspective of Islamic education, this concept aligns with core values such as *rahmah* (universal compassion), *mawaddah wa rahmah* (love and affection), and the role of the teacher as a *murabbi*, namely an educator who not only teaches (*ta'lim*) but also guides, nurtures, and fosters students holistically (Jadidah, 2021; Putri & Fadlullah, 2022).

In the context of educational practices in madrasah, initial observations and discussions with institutional leaders reveal several issues. Teachers, despite their strong dedication, tend to focus primarily on achieving national curriculum targets using conventional teaching methods. Limited understanding of strategies to integrate values of love and empathy into the learning process constitutes a significant challenge. Furthermore, the diversity of students' socio-economic backgrounds and the high intensity of digital device usage require more thoughtful and compassionate classroom management approaches. Meanwhile, in Islamic teachings, *rahmah* (compassion) is a fundamental principle, as stated in the Quran, Surah Al-Anbiya', verse 107, which emphasizes that the message of Islam is presented as a mercy for all creation (Engkizar et al., 2024; Engkizar, Jaafar, Hamzah, Syafril, Febriani, et al., 2026; Habibulloh, 2024).

Based on the identified urgency and existing problems, this study aims to analyze teachers' conceptual understanding of the principles of a love-based curriculum within the perspective of Islamic education, examine the development of instructional design and evaluation strategies that integrate the values of love, empathy, tolerance, and religious moderation, and explore the initial implementation of a love-based curriculum in fostering a more humanistic and inclusive learning environment.

METHODS

This study was conducted at a secondary Islamic school in Indonesia from August to October 2024, involving 25 teachers with diverse subject backgrounds, including Islamic Religious Education, natural sciences, social sciences, languages, and general subjects. This research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to examine the implementation of a love-based curriculum within the context of Islamic education. The research process was carried out through participatory and collaborative activities consisting of three main phases (Az-Zahra et al., 2025; Rahawarin et al., 2025). The first phase involved conceptual training and workshops covering the philosophy and principles of a love-based curriculum from both general educational perspectives and Islamic concepts such as *tarbiyah*, *ta'dib*, and the role of the *murabbi*, as well as adolescent developmental psychology, empathetic communication, the integration of religious moderation values (*wasatiyyah*), and humanistic classroom management techniques, including positive reinforcement (Jaafar, 2019; Siregar et al., 2024).

The second phase focused on assisting teachers in developing instructional tools, including analyzing basic competencies that could be integrated with values of love, designing lesson plans that incorporate cooperative learning strategies, value reflection, and affective assessment, as well as developing simple learning media that address emotional and spiritual dimensions. The third phase involved limited classroom implementation and reflective evaluation, in which teachers applied the designed lesson plans in their respective classes for at least two meetings, followed by classroom observations and focus group discussions to identify achievements, challenges, and potential solutions. Data were collected through observations of training and classroom activities, analysis of teachers' lesson plans, in-depth interviews with selected teachers and the school principal, as well as documentation of instructional practices (Abishev et al., 2025; Ath-Thukhi et al., 2025; Engkizar et al., 2026). Additional data were obtained from pre- and post-training questionnaires to support the interpretation of changes in teachers' conceptual understanding. The data were then analyzed using a descriptive-interpretive technique to identify patterns, meanings, and relationships within the implementation of the love-based curriculum (Akyuni et al., 2025; Albshkar et al., 2025; Kara, 2023; Markhmadova et al., 2025; Raskind et al., 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized into several key themes derived from the qualitative analysis. The findings indicate a substantial improvement in teachers' conceptual understanding of the love-based curriculum. Analysis of pre- and post-assessment data shows an increase from 45 percent to 82 percent in overall understanding. Initially, the majority of teachers tended to associate the concept of "love" in education primarily with gentleness and kindness, without recognizing its broader implications at the level of educational paradigm and curriculum design. Following the intervention, teachers demonstrated a more comprehensive understanding, recognizing that a love-based curriculum encompasses respectful teacher–student relationships, contextually relevant learning materials and methods, safe spaces for dialogue and expression, and holistic assessment practices that include affective dimensions (Rokhaya & Maulana, 2023). This shift also reflects a transformation in teachers' professional identity from knowledge transmitters (*mu'allim*) to nurturing educators (*murabbi*) who emphasize exemplary conduct (*qudwah hasanah*).

Changes were also observed in teaching practices, particularly in classroom interaction, instructional design, and classroom management. Teachers increasingly applied empathetic communication by using affirmative language, addressing

students respectfully, and listening to students' concerns before making disciplinary decisions. In terms of instructional design, lesson plans demonstrated greater creativity in integrating values into subject content. For example, in science lessons on ecosystems, teachers not only explained scientific concepts but also encouraged students to reflect on human responsibility as *kehalifah* in preserving nature. Similarly, in Islamic cultural history classes, discussions were directed toward values of peace and respect for diversity within Islamic civilization. Classroom management practices also shifted toward the use of positive reinforcement, such as specific praise and non-material rewards, reducing reliance on punitive approaches. These findings align with intrinsic motivation theory, which emphasizes the importance of relatedness and competence in supporting meaningful learning (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

A classroom case further illustrates this transformation. In a lesson on purification, the teacher-initiated learning through reflective questioning rather than direct instruction of legal rules. Students were invited to consider the meaning of cleanliness in daily life and its connection to spiritual awareness. This approach encouraged students to internalize the value of maintaining both physical and spiritual purity as an expression of gratitude and self-respect. Role-play activities were also used to foster empathy and cooperation, demonstrating a shift from rote memorization toward value-based learning.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings provide empirical support for the argument that effective learning is not solely determined by cognitive and instructional competence but is strongly influenced by the quality of emotional and psychological relationships in the classroom. Positive teacher–student relationships have been identified as significant predictors of learning outcomes, student engagement, and classroom climate (Oyelana et al., 2022). In this study, these relational principles are contextualized within Islamic education through the integration of values such as *rahmah* and the pedagogical role of the *murabbi*. The incorporation of these values functions not merely as symbolic elements but as operational principles that shape instructional practices. The internalization of *rahmah*, as highlighted by Al-Ali et al (2025), contributes to more inclusive and contextual religious understanding, reducing rigid and purely textual interpretations.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that the implementation of a relational and value-based approach extends beyond academic outcomes. It contributes to the development of a more inclusive and harmonious classroom environment, where students demonstrate increased participation and confidence. Teachers also reported improved professional satisfaction and reduced psychological stress in managing classroom dynamics. These outcomes suggest that the approach functions as a form of social and educational reinforcement, promoting both academic engagement and character development. The findings regarding the impact on teachers and students are summarized in Figure 1.

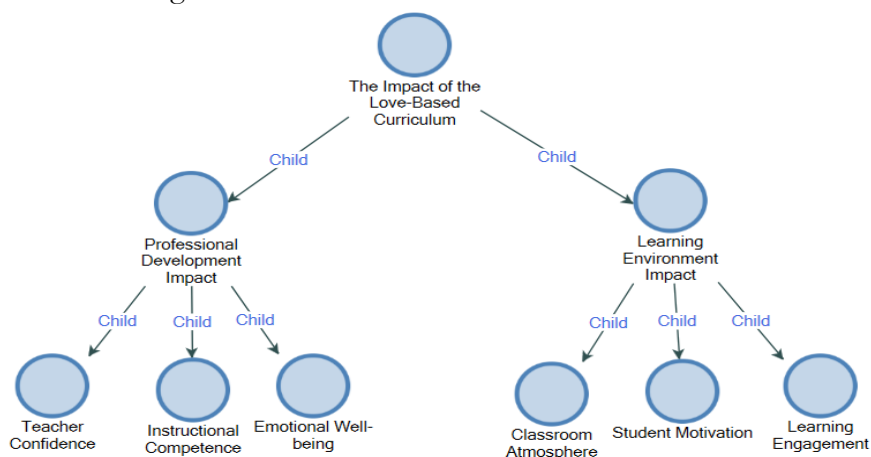


Fig 1. The Impact of the Love-Based Curriculum on Teachers and Students

The success of this implementation also indicates that teachers possess inherent cultural and religious capital that supports the adoption of humanistic pedagogical approaches. Values such as humility and benevolence provide a strong foundation for developing relational teaching practices. However, the findings also highlight that such potential requires systematic support and structured facilitation to be effectively translated into practical pedagogical competencies (Asril et al., 2023; Engkizar et al., 2025; Engkizar, Jaafar, Hamzah, Syafril, Febriani, et al., 2026).

To ensure sustainability, several follow-up strategies were identified, including the establishment of professional learning communities, the integration of humanistic teaching indicators into institutional evaluation systems, and the documentation of best practices for broader dissemination. These efforts are essential for strengthening the long-term impact of the love-based curriculum and reinforcing the role of Islamic educational institutions in promoting inclusive and value-oriented learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of a love-based curriculum contributes to enhancing teachers' capacity to adopt a more humanistic and value-oriented pedagogical approach. The findings indicate improvements not only at the conceptual level but also in instructional design and pedagogical communication practices. The integration of Islamic values such as *rahmah*, *bikmah*, and justice into the operational curriculum plays a significant role in fostering more meaningful learning experiences and strengthening students' character development.

Furthermore, this study highlights that a relational and value-based approach to education has the potential to create a more positive and supportive classroom climate, which in turn contributes to both academic engagement and affective development. These findings suggest that a love-based curriculum is not merely complementary but represents a relevant pedagogical framework for contemporary Islamic education.

In this regard, the study contributes to the growing discourse on humanistic and values-based education by offering an integrative perspective that connects contemporary pedagogical theory with Islamic educational principles. Future research is recommended to explore broader implementation across diverse educational contexts and to examine its long-term impact on student outcomes.

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