IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INDEX CARD MATCH STRATEGY IN IMPROVING LEARNING OUTCOMES IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Abstract

Teacher creativity in using learning strategies significantly influences student engagement and learning outcomes. This study examines the effectiveness of the Index Card Match strategy in improving learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education at Sukorambi State Middle School. The problem identified was the dominance of lecture and discussion methods, which led to decreased student enthusiasm and achievement. The research aimed to explore how planning, implementing, and evaluating learning using the Index Card Match strategy could enhance student outcomes. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with purposive sampling, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Data analysis included data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, with validity ensured through source and technical triangulation. The findings revealed that learning planning involved syllabus preparation, detailed lesson plans, and the use of card-based learning media designed for active student participation. During implementation, the strategy was applied in core learning activities, promoting student engagement through interactive learning. Evaluation focused on assessing cognitive and affective aspects, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the material. The study concludes that the Index Card Match strategy effectively enhances student engagement and learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education, addressing the limitations of traditional methods. This strategy provides a more dynamic, student-centered learning experience, making it a valuable approach for educators.

Keyword: *Index Card Match, Islamic Religious Education, learning outcomes*

Abstrak

Kreativitas guru dalam menggunakan strategi pembelajaran memiliki pengaruh signifikan terhadap keterlibatan siswa dan hasil belajar. Penelitian ini mengkaji efektivitas strategi Index Card Match dalam meningkatkan hasil belajar Pendidikan Agama Islam di SMP Negeri Sukorambi. Masalah yang diidentifikasi adalah dominasi metode ceramah dan diskusi yang menyebabkan penurunan antusiasme dan pencapaian siswa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana perencanaan, pelaksanaan, dan evaluasi pembelajaran menggunakan strategi Index Card Match dapat meningkatkan hasil belajar siswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik purposive sampling. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Analisis data meliputi kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan, dengan validitas data dijamin melalui triangulasi sumber dan teknik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perencanaan pembelajaran melibatkan penyusunan silabus, modul ajar, dan penggunaan media pembelajaran berbasis kartu yang dirancang untuk meningkatkan partisipasi aktif siswa. Pada tahap pelaksanaan, strategi diterapkan dalam kegiatan inti pembelajaran, yang mendorong keterlibatan siswa melalui pembelajaran interaktif. Evaluasi difokuskan pada penilaian aspek kognitif dan afektif untuk memastikan pemahaman materi secara komprehensif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa strategi Index Card Match efektif dalam meningkatkan keterlibatan dan hasil belajar siswa pada Pendidikan Agama Islam, mengatasi keterbatasan metode tradisional. Strategi ini memberikan pengalaman belajar yang lebih dinamis dan berpusat pada siswa, sehingga menjadi pendekatan yang berharga bagi pendidik.

Kata Kunci: Index Card Match, Pendidikan Agama Islam, Hasil Belajar

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Introduction

Social change and the rapid development of information technology have shifted the learning paradigm from traditional approaches toward active, participatory, and experience-based learning. In the context of 21st-century demands, students are not only expected to master theoretical knowledge but also to develop critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). In this regard, monotonous and uninspired teaching methods have become a significant obstacle in achieving educational goals. One of the main challenges in the classroom is the low motivation and limited active participation of students, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (IRE), which is often associated with lectures and rote memorization (Mawardi et al., 2021; Fadhilah & Mahfud, 2022).

Several studies have found that learning outcomes in IRE tend to be low due to a lack of innovative teaching strategies that can spark students' interest. Research by Rimadhanty and Sulaiman (2023) reveals that poor academic performance is largely caused by the limited application of collaborative and student-centered learning approaches. Additionally, a national survey conducted by the Indonesian

Ministry of Education (2022) confirms that most teachers still rely on conventional methods and rarely incorporate interactive strategies that focus on student engagement.

Previous studies have demonstrated that active learning strategies such as *Index Card Match (ICM)* can enhance student engagement, conceptual understanding, and academic achievement (Sentia, 2018; Ramadhani & Ningsih, 2021). This strategy integrates elements of games and information matching through question-and-answer cards, which encourage students to move, think, and communicate actively with peers. According to Silberman (2014), learning activities that involve physical movement and social interaction like ICM significantly improve student involvement and memory retention.

However, most existing studies tend to focus on quantitative approaches to measure the effectiveness of this strategy in general or science education settings. There is limited qualitative research that explores the dynamics of ICM implementation within the context of Islamic Religious Education (Yusof & Halim, 2022; Mahmud, 2023). Therefore, a research gap exists in documenting the experiences of teachers and students in applying the ICM strategy in IRE learning at the junior high school level.

This study aims to describe in-depth the implementation of the Index Card Match strategy in improving students' learning outcomes in Islamic Religious Education. The research focuses on the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of learning, as well as student responses to the strategy.

The study is grounded in the framework of social constructivism, which views learning as a process of constructing meaning through social interaction and direct experience (Vygotsky, 1978). The ICM strategy aligns well with this principle, as it allows students to build their understanding through active, collaborative, and enjoyable activities (Slavin, 2015; Brame, 2016).

The urgency of this research lies in its contribution to enriching the literature on active learning strategies rooted in Islamic values that are applicable and contextual in the classroom. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing more dynamic and meaningful Islamic Religious Education learning experiences.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. This approach was selected because it is appropriate for the purpose of understanding in depth the implementation of the *Index Card Match* strategy in Islamic Religious Education learning at a junior high school. Qualitative descriptive research aims to systematically describe, interpret, and map phenomena based on the experiences and perspectives of the subjects within their natural contexts (Mahmud, 2011). The research was conducted at a public junior high school in East Java, chosen purposively based on preliminary findings that indicated low student achievement in IRE, largely due to the predominance of conventional teaching strategies. The *Index Card Match* strategy was introduced as an alternative method to enhance student engagement and academic performance.

The informants in this study were selected through purposive sampling. This technique allows the researcher to choose individuals who are considered most knowledgeable about the research topic (Sugiyono, 2018). The informants included the school principal, the vice principal of curriculum, IRE teachers, and seventh-grade students (class VIID), all of whom were directly involved in the learning process using the *Index Card Match* strategy.

Data were collected using three techniques: participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Through participatory observation, the researcher was present during classroom activities, observing the interactions between teachers and students, and documenting the dynamics of the learning process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the perceptions, experiences, and evaluations of the informants regarding the use of the strategy. Document analysis was used to examine instructional tools such as lesson plans, learning outcomes, and classroom documentation.

The researcher acted as the main instrument of the study. This role required the researcher to build trust with the informants, maintain neutrality, and engage directly with the field while documenting the findings through field notes, audio recordings, and reflective journals. The researcher adopted a dialogic and open approach to foster honest communication with participants and obtain credible data.

To ensure the validity of the findings, the study applied both source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from multiple informants (teachers, students, school leaders), while technique

triangulation involved comparing data from different collection methods (observation, interviews, and documentation). These triangulation strategies enhanced the credibility and consistency of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data condensation involved selecting and simplifying the raw data to focus on relevant aspects. Data display was done through narrative descriptions and thematic matrices to facilitate understanding of the data. The final stage was conclusion drawing and verification, where recurring patterns and meanings were identified and interpreted.

In addition, thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes emerging from the data, such as planning, implementation techniques, student responses, and learning outcomes. This inductive analytical strategy allowed for a dynamic, iterative understanding of how the *Index Card Match* strategy influenced the IRE learning process. The analysis was continuously refined throughout the research process, guided by field insights and theoretical perspectives.

Findings and Discussion

Learning Planning Using the Index Card Match (ICM) Strategy

The research findings indicate that learning planning by Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMPN 1 Buay Bahuga was carried out systematically, contextually, and in a student-centered manner. The Index Card Match (ICM) strategy was employed not as a complementary method but as the primary approach in the learning process. The planning process included syllabus development, the preparation of Teaching Modules, ICM cards, and Student Worksheets (LKPD), all of which were designed to support active and participatory learning.

In the syllabus design, the teacher aligned the Learning Outcomes (CP) and Learning Objectives Pathway (ATP) with active learning approaches. This reflects the teacher's understanding of the importance of integrated and student-oriented planning, as emphasized by Majid (2007), who states that the syllabus is a pedagogical document forming the foundation of instructional strategies.

The school principal stated: "*We encourage teachers, especially Islamic Education teachers, to design creative and contextual learning. One method that has been quite successful is the use of Index Card Match.*" (Interview, March 18, 2025).

This statement indicates institutional support for pedagogical innovation rooted in local values and student learning needs.

The Teaching Module developed by the teacher explicitly includes the steps for implementing ICM in the core learning activities. This aligns with Jaya's (2019) view that Teaching Modules serve as dynamic guides that allow flexibility and responsiveness to students' diverse characteristics.

The teacher stated: "*When designing the module, I include ICM steps in the core activities. That way, I don't just rely on lecturing—I invite students to move, interact, and learn together.*" *(Interview, March 20, 2025).* This demonstrates the teacher's awareness of their role as a facilitator, in line with the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on student-centered and liberating learning.

The preparation of visually appealing ICM cards was also a crucial aspect of planning. The cards were designed with colorful visuals and illustrations related to the material. This is consistent with the principles of active learning as emphasized by Silberman (2022), who highlights the importance of varied stimuli to engage students.

A student shared: "*The cards are so colorful—it's really fun. It feels like playing a guessing game, but we're learning at the same time.*" *(Interview, March 22, 2025).* This reflects the teacher's success in creating an emotionally engaging learning experience that sparks student interest.

Additionally, the LKPD was designed as a tool to reinforce student understanding after the active session. The worksheets included problem-solving and conceptual understanding tasks, reflecting a constructivist learning model as described by Trianto (2003). It also served as a form of formative assessment to support the gradual and reflective achievement of learning objectives.

Learning Implementation Using the Index Card Match Strategy

The implementation of the ICM strategy was divided into three main stages: opening, core, and closing activities. Each stage demonstrated a transformation toward student-centered pedagogical practices, in line with the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes learning autonomy, active participation, and differentiation.

In the opening activity, the teacher fostered a positive emotional climate and conveyed the learning objectives in a contextual manner. The teacher stated: "*I always start by explaining how the material relates to their lives, then I trigger their curiosity with simple questions.*" *(Interview, March 20, 2025).* This approach aligns

with the principle of connecting learning to real life, which not only provides direction but also builds meaning and internal motivation for students.

In the core activity, the ICM strategy was implemented through card-matching, discussions, and presentations. These activities stimulated critical thinking, emotional engagement, and peer collaboration.

A student shared: "*I get really excited, especially when searching for a match. It's fun and not boring like usual.*" *(Interview, March 22, 2025).* This shows that physically and socially interactive learning can create a dynamic and engaging classroom atmosphere. This finding is consistent with Yusof & Halim (2022), who emphasized that physical and emotional involvement is essential for meaningful learning.

The closing session involved reflection and reinforcement of key concepts. The teacher allowed students to express their impressions and challenges during the lesson. This served as a form of process-based formative assessment, as emphasized by the Merdeka Curriculum, which values student growth and participation over final outcomes.

Learning Evaluation Using the Index Card Match Strategy

Evaluation was conducted holistically and continuously through observation of student participation, LKPD results, and student self-reflection. This approach supports authentic assessment, as highlighted in the Merdeka Curriculum, which evaluates not only outcomes but also collaboration, confidence, and student voice.

The teacher stated: "*I don't just assess right or wrong answers—I also look at how active students are, how they help each other, and whether they're brave enough to share their ideas.*" *(Interview, March 20, 2025).* This illustrates a shift from product-based to process-based assessment. It encourages students to take ownership and reflect on their own learning, in line with formative assessment principles by Black & Wiliam (2006).

This study makes a significant contribution to the development of Islamic Religious Education practices based on the Merdeka Curriculum. The Index Card Match strategy proved effective not only in enhancing cognitive learning outcomes but also in fostering students' social and emotional competencies. Collaborative activities, peer interaction, and shared reflection created a lively, enjoyable, and meaningful learning environment. This is aligned with the core principle of the Merdeka Curriculum, which prioritizes joyful learning and the fulfillment of each student's unique potential.

The novelty of this research lies in its integration of an active learning strategy within the context of IRE, which is often still dominated by lecture-based approaches. Through ICM, IRE becomes more contextual and interactive, without diminishing the depth of religious values being taught. On the contrary, it provides students with opportunities to experience and internalize religious values through social practice and critical discussion. The findings show that limited facilities do not prevent teachers from implementing innovative strategies, provided there is commitment, creativity, and school support. This context expands the literature on active learning practices in low-access educational environments.

Finally, the focus on strengthening students' affective and social dimensions is a unique feature of this study. The Merdeka Curriculum places the Pancasila Student Profile at the heart of national education, and the ICM strategy has proven effective in fostering values such as collaboration, critical thinking, and responsibility. Thus, ICM can serve as a model of 21st-century education, producing students who are academically capable, emotionally mature, and socially empowered.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study on the *Implementation of the Index Card Match Strategy to Improve Learning Outcomes in Islamic Religious Education*, it can be concluded that the Index Card Match (ICM) strategy is an effective active learning approach that enhances students' learning outcomes in both cognitive and affective domains.

First, the lesson planning using the ICM strategy was carried out systematically and contextually. Teachers prepared learning components such as the syllabus, Teaching Modules, ICM cards, and Student Worksheets (LKPD), all designed to support active, collaborative, and engaging learning. This planning aligns with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes differentiated and student-centered learning.

Second, the implementation of the ICM strategy involved three main stages: the opening activity, which created a positive emotional atmosphere and conveyed the objectives contextually; the core activity, where students matched cards, engaged in discussions, and presented their findings; and the closing activity, which involved reflection and concept reinforcement. This strategy effectively increased student participation, curiosity, and collaboration.

Third, learning evaluation was conducted holistically, combining cognitive assessment through written tests and affective assessment through observation of students' engagement and participation. The results showed a significant improvement: the number of students scoring above the minimum mastery criteria (70) increased from 15 before using the strategy to 25 after its implementation. Thus, the ICM strategy not only improved academic achievement but also supported the integrative development of students' social and emotional competencies within Islamic Religious Education.

The implementation of the Index Card Match (ICM) strategy in Islamic Religious Education learning has significant implications for various aspects of education. First, in terms of pedagogy, the success of ICM in improving both cognitive and social-emotional learning outcomes highlights the need for active learning strategies to be more widely integrated into teaching practices. The shift from traditional lecture-based teaching to student-centered methods not only promotes interaction and collaboration but also fosters critical thinking, which is essential for preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate innovative approaches that engage students actively, allowing them to take ownership of their learning while developing skills that go beyond memorization.

In terms of curriculum, this study aligns with the objectives of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Freedom to Learn Curriculum), which emphasizes differentiation, learner autonomy, and formative assessment. The ability of the ICM strategy to support these goals demonstrates the value of designing teaching methods that are not only academically challenging but also emotionally engaging and contextually relevant. Educators are thus encouraged to implement curricula that go beyond standardized testing, incorporating strategies that facilitate deep learning and personal growth. This approach ensures that students can internalize lessons and values while engaging meaningfully with the material.

Psychosocially, the ICM strategy's ability to increase student motivation, enjoyment, and interaction with peers underscores the importance of addressing the affective and social dimensions of learning. Beyond academic performance, education must focus on fostering empathy, cooperation, and self-confidence among students. By engaging students in collaborative activities, such as matching cards and discussing topics with peers, they learn not only content but also essential life skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. This holistic approach to

learning prepares students to be well-rounded individuals who are capable of succeeding in both academic and social contexts.

Finally, the application of ICM in a rural school context brings attention to the equity implications of educational innovation. Despite limitations in resources, the ICM strategy proved to be an effective method for improving student outcomes, challenging the belief that quality education is solely dependent on infrastructure. This study highlights the importance of teacher creativity and institutional support in ensuring that all students, regardless of their geographical or socioeconomic background, have access to meaningful and effective learning experiences. It suggests that with the right commitment, even schools in resource-limited areas can implement innovative teaching strategies that significantly impact students' academic, social, and emotional development.

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