



REVITALIZING ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AT THE JUNIOR SECONDARY LEVEL THROUGH MEANINGFUL LEARNING: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the junior secondary level (SMP/MTs) continues to face challenges related to student engagement and the relevance of learning to students' everyday experiences. Many studies indicate that IRE instruction is still dominated by conventional approaches that emphasize content delivery, leaving limited space for reflection and value internalization. In response to these challenges, meaningful learning has been discussed as an approach that connects religious knowledge with students' lived realities. This study presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework to examine empirical research on the implementation of meaningful learning in Islamic Religious Education at the SMP/MTs level. Articles published between 2014 and 2024 were collected from several academic databases, including Google Scholar, Springer Nature Link, JSTOR, DOAJ, Taylor & Francis, and Brill. Through a staged screening process, ten empirical studies were selected for final analysis. The findings show that meaningful learning in IRE is commonly implemented through contextual and student-centered strategies, such as Contextual Teaching and Learning, Problem-Based Learning, project-based activities, cooperative learning, and reflective practices. These approaches are associated with increased student engagement, deeper understanding of religious concepts, and stronger opportunities for value internalization. However, most studies focus on short-term outcomes and provide limited discussion of assessment and long-term impacts. This review highlights the need to position meaningful learning as a reflective and context-sensitive pedagogical approach in Islamic Religious Education.

Keywords: *Meaningful Learning; Islamic Religious Education; Student Engagement; Systematic Literature Review*

A. Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the junior secondary level (SMP/MTs) is closely intertwined with students' everyday experiences as adolescents. At this stage, students encounter religious ideas alongside social relationships, emotional change, and growing exposure to digital and peer environments. Religious learning, therefore, is not

separated from daily life; it becomes part of how students interpret situations, respond to others, and make sense of values they encounter in school and beyond.

In many junior secondary classrooms, however, IRE learning still takes place within familiar instructional routines. Lessons are commonly structured around teacher explanations and textbook materials, while student participation remains limited (Muamanah & Suyadi, 2020; Simbolon et al., 2022). Religious content is delivered systematically, yet classroom interaction often revolves around completing material rather than exploring meaning. Within this setting, students may demonstrate knowledge of concepts, but opportunities to relate those concepts to personal experience are relatively rare.

Several studies describe this condition as part of a broader pattern in which Islamic education functions more as a formal subject than as a reflective learning space. Religious lessons are completed, assessments are conducted, and learning objectives are formally achieved. At the same time, questions related to how students interpret values, negotiate moral choices, or relate Islamic teachings to real situations receive less attention. This tension has been noted repeatedly in discussions on the practice of IRE at the junior secondary level.

Within recent educational discourse, meaningful learning has been discussed as a way of rethinking how religious knowledge is approached in the classroom. Rather than treating learning as the transfer of information, meaningful learning emphasizes experience, discussion, and reflection as integral parts of the learning process. In studies of Islamic education, approaches such as Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), project-based learning, Ibrah–Mau‘izhah, cooperative learning, and blended learning are frequently associated with classroom practices that involve students more actively and invite them to engage with religious ideas in concrete situations (Fajar et al., 2021; Ni’mah et al., 2025).

Despite the growing number of studies addressing these approaches, research on meaningful learning in IRE remains dispersed. Existing studies often focus on particular teaching models, classroom activities, or short-term outcomes, each within a specific context. As a result, the broader picture of how meaningful learning is understood, practiced, and sustained in IRE at the SMP/MTs level has yet to be clearly articulated. The literature also reflects uneven attention to issues beyond classroom implementation. Discussions of assessment tend to focus on learning outcomes without explicitly addressing how meaningfulness itself is evaluated. Practical constraints faced by teachers—such as curriculum demands, time allocation, and pedagogical readiness—are mentioned sporadically rather than examined in depth. Long-term observations of how students carry religious understanding into behavior and practice are still limited.

Against this background, this article presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) based on the PRISMA 2020 framework, bringing together empirical studies on meaningful learning in Islamic Religious Education at the junior secondary level. The review brings these studies into conversation with one another, highlighting patterns of practice, commonly used strategies, and recurring challenges. By doing so, this study

seeks to deepen understanding of meaningful learning as a foundation for IRE that is grounded in classroom realities and attentive to students' lived experiences.

B. Methods

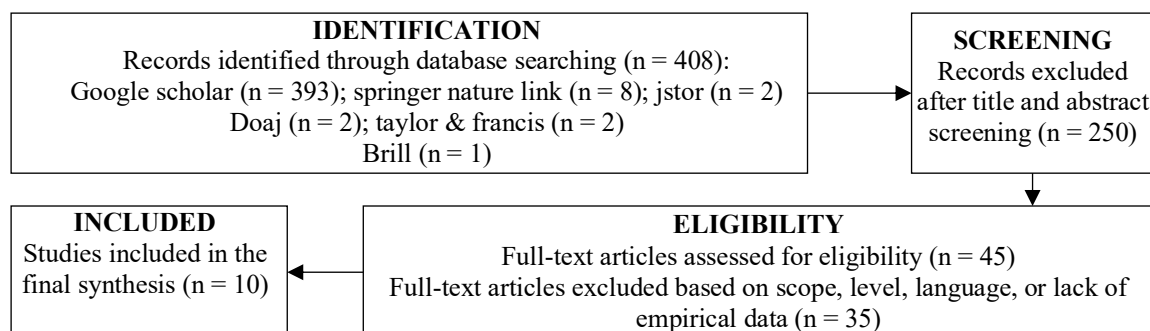
This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine empirical research on meaningful learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the junior secondary level (SMP/MTs). The review focused on how meaningful learning is applied in classroom practice, the instructional strategies most frequently used, and the challenges reported in school contexts. To ensure transparency in the review process, the selection of studies followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The literature search was conducted using several academic databases, including Google Scholar, Springer Nature Link, JSTOR, DOAJ, Taylor & Francis, and Brill. Publications from 2014 to 2024 were considered. Keywords related to meaningful learning and Islamic education were used in various combinations, including “meaningful learning,” “Islamic Religious Education,” “Islamic education,” “junior secondary school,” “SMP,” and “Madrasah Tsanawiyah.” The initial search resulted in 408 records.

Screening was carried out in stages. Titles and abstracts were first reviewed to identify relevance to the focus of the study, resulting in the exclusion of 250 records. Full-text screening was then conducted on 45 articles to assess empirical relevance, educational level, and language. Studies that did not focus on SMP/MTs, were not written in English, or lacked empirical classroom data were excluded. Following this process, 10 studies were retained for final analysis. The selected articles were reviewed using a qualitative interpretive approach. Rather than aggregating results statistically, the analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns related to instructional strategies, classroom interaction, and learning experiences. The synthesis was conducted narratively to reflect contextual similarities and differences across studies. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are summarized in Table 1, while the overall selection process is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Studies examining meaningful learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE)	Studies unrelated to IRE or meaningful learning
Focus on SMP/MTs or equivalent junior secondary level	Studies at primary, senior secondary, or higher education levels
Empirical studies (qualitative or mixed methods)	Conceptual papers or opinion-based articles
Published between 2014–2024	Published outside the selected time range
Written in English	Written in languages other than English

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram



C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

The systematic review resulted in ten empirical studies that met the inclusion criteria. These studies were published between 2014 and 2024 and were conducted primarily in Indonesia, with additional contributions from Malaysia and Mexico. Most of the selected articles examined classroom practices in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the junior secondary level and focused on instructional efforts to relate religious content to students' everyday experiences. An overview of the characteristics of the reviewed studies, including research context and key outcomes, is presented in Table 2.

Across the reviewed literature, meaningful learning was described through classroom practices that emphasized contextualization, student involvement, and reflective engagement. Although the instructional models differed across studies, they shared a common orientation toward connecting Islamic teachings with situations familiar to students, such as worship practices, social interaction, and moral decision-making. Rather than treating religious knowledge as isolated content, the studies portrayed learning as a process situated within students' lived realities.

The synthesis of findings was conducted through a comparative reading of the selected studies, allowing patterns to emerge across different contexts. Four main themes were identified: contextual and experiential learning strategies, value internalization, student engagement, and cognitive and higher-order thinking development. These themes reflect recurring emphases in how meaningful learning is implemented within IRE classrooms.

The first theme concerns the use of contextual and experiential learning strategies. Several studies reported the application of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), and project-based activities to situate religious concepts within real-life contexts. Learning activities were often designed around situations familiar to students, enabling them to relate Islamic teachings to everyday practices rather than approaching them solely as abstract knowledge.

The second theme relates to value internalization. A number of studies highlighted instructional practices that encouraged students to reflect on Islamic values and their relevance to personal conduct. Approaches such as Ibrah–Mau'izhah and guided

reflection were described as fostering emotional engagement and moral awareness. These practices emphasized reflection and habituation rather than cognitive mastery alone.

Student engagement emerged as the third theme. Studies consistently noted increased student participation in classrooms where learning involved discussion, collaboration, and interactive tasks. Cooperative learning models and dialogic activities were commonly associated with higher levels of attentiveness and involvement. In these settings, students were described as more willing to express ideas and engage with religious topics.

The fourth theme concerns cognitive and higher-order thinking development. Several studies reported that meaningful learning practices supported students' ability to think critically and connect religious concepts with broader social contexts. Inquiry-based activities and reflective tasks were associated with deeper conceptual understanding, particularly in areas related to fiqh, ethics, and daily religious practice.

In addition to shared patterns, the reviewed studies also revealed several limitations. Most research focused on short-term classroom implementation and immediate learning outcomes, with limited attention to the long-term influence of meaningful learning on students' behavior or religious practice. Furthermore, the studies varied in how learning outcomes were assessed, and none employed assessment instruments specifically designed to capture the meaningfulness of learning in the context of Islamic Religious Education.

Table 2. Overview of Reviewed Studies and Key Themes

Author (Year)	Country	Focus of Study	Key Outcome	Theme
Parhan et al. (2024)	Indonesia	CTL in IRE learning	Improved conceptual and practical understanding	Contextual Learning
Husna (2024)	Indonesia	PBL and technology	Increased engagement and value application	Student Engagement
Khansa et al. (2024)	Indonesia	Integrated learning model	Improved understanding of Islamic values	Value Internalization
Jayanegara et al. (2024)	Indonesia	Innovative IRE methods	Increased motivation and participation	Engagement & Cognition
Nurmawati et al. (2021)	Indonesia	Ibrah–Mau'izhah	Emotional and moral reflection	Value Internalization
Mohamad Hsbollah & Hassan (2022)	Malaysia	PBL and assessment	Active learning experience	Contextual Learning
Vargas-Hernández &	Mexico	Meaningful learning strategies	Improved relevance of learning	Contextual Learning

Vargas-González (2022)				
Aziz et al. (2022)	Indonesia	Ibrah–Mau‘izhah	Value awareness	Value Internalization
Setiawan et al. (2020)	Indonesia	CTL in fiqh learning	Conceptual understanding	Contextual Learning
Munir (2020)	Indonesia	CTL and thinking skills	Higher-order thinking	Cognitive Development

2. Discussion

1) Meaningful Learning in Islamic Religious Education at the SMP/MTs Level

The reviewed studies consistently describe meaningful learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the SMP/MTs level as an effort to bring religious knowledge closer to students' everyday realities. Rather than positioning Islamic teachings as abstract content, learning activities are oriented toward experiences familiar to adolescents, including social interaction, worship practices, and moral situations encountered in daily life. This orientation reflects earlier critiques of conventional IRE learning, which tends to emphasize content delivery while offering limited space for contextual engagement (Muamanah & Suyadi, 2020; Simbolon et al., 2022).

Several studies indicate that this shift toward meaningful learning aligns with broader discussions on constructivist learning, particularly the idea that new knowledge becomes meaningful when connected to learners' prior understanding and experience (Novak, 2002; Bryce & Blown, 2023). In the context of Islamic education, this connection is especially relevant, as religious learning is closely tied to personal belief, moral judgment, and everyday practice. Research conducted in Indonesian junior secondary schools shows that contextualization allows students to recognize the relevance of Islamic teachings beyond formal instruction (Setiawan et al., 2020; Munir, 2020).

At the same time, the literature suggests that meaningful learning in IRE is not uniformly understood or implemented. Some studies describe learning practices that remain procedural, where contextual examples are introduced without sustained reflection (Parhan et al., 2024). Others emphasize deeper engagement through discussion and moral interpretation (Vargas-Hernández & Vargas-González, 2022). These variations indicate that meaningful learning in IRE is shaped by pedagogical interpretation rather than by method alone, reinforcing the need to examine how meaning is constructed within classroom interaction.

2) Instructional Strategies Supporting Meaningful Learning

Across the reviewed literature, several instructional strategies repeatedly appear in discussions of meaningful learning in IRE. Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL), Problem-Based Learning (PBL), project-based learning, cooperative learning, and blended learning are commonly described as approaches that encourage student involvement and experiential engagement. Studies conducted in Indonesia and Malaysia highlight how CTL helps students relate religious concepts to concrete practices such as

prayer, social ethics, and community interaction (Setiawan et al., 2020; Parhan et al., 2024).

Problem-based and project-based approaches are discussed as providing space for students to explore religious values through inquiry and collaboration. Research by Husna (2024), Mohamad Hsbollah and Hassan (2022), and Munir (2020) suggests that these strategies allow students to engage with Islamic teachings through problem-solving and reflective tasks rather than rote memorization. Similar observations appear in international contexts, where meaningful learning is associated with learning environments that encourage exploration and dialogue (Kostiainen et al., 2018; Mystakidis et al., 2019).

However, the reviewed studies also show that the effectiveness of these strategies depends on instructional design and facilitation. CTL and PBL are described as meaningful when learning activities are followed by guided reflection that explicitly links experience to Islamic values (Aziz et al., 2022; Nurmawati et al., 2021). Without this reflective dimension, instructional strategies risk becoming technical variations rather than meaningful learning experiences. This finding resonates with broader critiques in Islamic education studies, which caution against adopting methods without integrating them into a coherent educational vision (Sahin, 2018).

3) Student Engagement and Value Internalization

Student engagement is a central theme in discussions of meaningful learning within IRE. Several studies report increased participation, motivation, and attentiveness when learning activities involve discussion, collaboration, and interactive tasks (Jayanegara et al., 2024; Khansa et al., 2024). In such classrooms, students are more likely to express ideas, ask questions, and relate religious content to personal experience. Engagement, in this sense, is not merely behavioral but also cognitive and emotional.

Value internalization is closely linked to this form of engagement. Studies focusing on Ibrah–Mau‘izhah emphasize the role of narrative, reflection, and habituation in helping students internalize Islamic values (Aziz et al., 2022; Nurmawati et al., 2021). Rather than treating values as abstract principles, these approaches allow students to encounter moral meanings through stories, examples, and personal reflection. This process reflects traditional Islamic educational concepts that emphasize moral formation alongside knowledge transmission (Ma’zumi et al., 2019).

Despite these insights, most studies examine value internalization within short instructional periods. Research rarely follows students beyond immediate classroom contexts to observe how religious understanding shapes behavior over time (Ni’mah et al., 2025). As a result, the sustainability of value internalization remains an open question. This limitation suggests the need for longitudinal research that examines how meaningful learning influences students’ moral development and religious practice in the long term.

4) Constraints and Unresolved Issues in Practice

The reviewed literature also highlights several constraints that shape the implementation of meaningful learning in IRE. Many challenges arise from institutional

conditions rather than from resistance to innovation. Curriculum demands, limited instructional time, and assessment systems that prioritize cognitive outcomes often restrict opportunities for reflective and experiential learning (Ni'mah et al., 2025; Simbolon et al., 2022). Under such conditions, meaningful learning strategies are sometimes implemented as supplementary activities rather than as integral components of instruction.

Another recurring issue concerns assessment. Most studies rely on general learning outcomes or observational indicators, without developing instruments specifically designed to measure meaningful learning in Islamic Religious Education (Nurhasanah et al., 2022). This limitation makes it difficult to compare findings across studies and to evaluate learning processes beyond surface-level outcomes. The absence of standardized assessment tools remains a significant gap in the literature.

Finally, the reviewed studies rarely situate meaningful learning within the epistemological framework of Islamic education. While experience and reflection are emphasized, explicit connections to concepts such as *ta'dīb*, *tarbiyah*, and *tazkiyah* are largely absent (Ma'zumi et al., 2019; Sahin, 2018). This gap suggests that meaningful learning in IRE is often treated as a pedagogical strategy rather than as part of a broader educational philosophy. Bridging this conceptual divide may offer a more coherent foundation for integrating meaningful learning into Islamic education at the SMP/MTs level.

D. Conclusion

This systematic literature review shows that meaningful learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the SMP/MTs level is primarily understood as an effort to connect religious knowledge with students' lived experiences. Across the reviewed studies, meaningful learning is reflected in instructional practices that emphasize contextualization, active engagement, and reflective processes, allowing students to encounter Islamic values within situations familiar to their daily lives. Rather than functioning solely as a set of teaching techniques, meaningful learning appears as an approach that reshapes how religious content is framed, experienced, and interpreted in the classroom.

At the same time, the review highlights important limitations in existing research and practice. Most studies focus on short-term classroom implementation and rely on general learning outcomes, with limited attention to assessment instruments that capture meaningfulness or to the long-term development of students' moral and religious behavior. In addition, meaningful learning is rarely situated within the broader epistemological framework of Islamic education, leaving a conceptual gap between pedagogical practice and foundational educational values. Future research is therefore encouraged to explore meaningful learning through longitudinal designs, develop context-sensitive assessment tools, and more explicitly integrate Islamic educational concepts such as *ta'dīb*, *tarbiyah*, and *tazkiyah*, in order to strengthen the role of

meaningful learning as a sustainable foundation for Islamic Religious Education at the junior secondary level.

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