

Humanistic Approach: Implementation of Islamic Religious Education Learning to Increase Social Empathy Among students in junior high school

Siti Eliyani, JM Ekafitrianda*

Pendidikan Agama Islam, UIN Sultan Thaha Saifudin Jambi, Indonesia

e-mail: j.m.ekafitrianda@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author.

Abstract: This study examines the application of a humanistic approach in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) to improve students' social empathy at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun. This research is motivated by a decrease in students' social sensitivity and the persistence of teacher-centered learning practices that focus primarily on cognitive achievement. Qualitative descriptive methods are used to explore the learning process, teacher-student interaction, and the formation of empathy in the classroom. Data were collected through participatory observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving principals, IRE teachers, and eighth-graders. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman models, including data subtraction, data display, and conclusion drawn. The findings show that humanistic approaches create a psychologically, dialogically, and student-centered learning environment. Teachers who demonstrate unconditional conformity, empathy, and positive attention are able to reduce students' anxiety and encourage open interaction. Social empathy develops through a gradual psychological process that consists of three phases: the creation of a sense of security, social interaction in cooperative learning, and the internalization of values through reflection. This study concludes that humanistic approaches are effective in fostering empathy and meaningful social relationships, even in schools with limited facilities.

Keywords: Humanistic approach, Islamic Religious Education, social empathy, character education, junior high school

How to Cite: Eliyani, S., Ekafitrianda, JM. (2026). Humanistic Approach: Implementation of Islamic Religious Education Learning to Increase Social Empathy Among students in junior high school. *At-Ta'lim: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 12 (1), 31-39. <https://doi.org/10.55210/attalim.v12i1.2427>

Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays an important role in balancing the cognitive aspect with the formation of character and moral values for students in the midst of global dynamics. In today's digital era, the main competency that individuals must possess to maintain social harmony is social empathy, which is the ability to proactively understand, feel, and respond to the emotional state of others. (Sugiarto & Farid, 2023; Yamamoto & Ananou, 2015). This cultivation of empathy is in line with Islamic principles such as rahmah (compassion) and ta'awun (mutual cooperation), which form the foundation of interpersonal relationships (Mala et al., 2024; Maslani et al., 2025). Theoretically, applying the right learning approach in PAI will not only educate students intellectually, but also emotionally and spiritually (Mundofi, 2025; Yusuf, 2022).

Contemporary realities show moral degradation and a decline in the quality of social interaction among adolescents. The digital age has brought with it the main challenge of reduced emotional sensitivity due to exposure to negative content and an increase in cases of cyberbullying and hate speech. (Ghosh et al., 2025; Kaleem Imam & Naz, 2024). The main problem often comes from the teaching method of PAI that is still conventional, rigid, and too focused on memorizing teacher-centered material. (Assalihee et al., 2024; H. Ismail & Shazwan, 2025). This results in religious values only being understood textually without being internalized into actual social behavior, so students tend

to be individualistic and less concerned about the surrounding environment. (I. Ismail et al., 2022; Syamsul Aripin & Nana Meily Nurdiansyah, 2022).

Although various studies have examined the humanistic approach in Islamic Religious Education, most studies still place it as a strategy to increase motivation or cognitive learning outcomes. Meanwhile, the social dynamics of adolescents in the digital age show a new urgency: religious education is no longer enough to just transmit values, but must be able to cultivate social empathy as an essential character competency. Thus, it is necessary to strengthen a pedagogical approach that is explicitly oriented towards the formation of relational experiences and psychological security of students. The humanistic approach becomes relevant to be reconstructed in this context, especially in educational units with distinctive social and geographical characteristics.

This condition is clearly found at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun. Based on the pre-observation results, the social empathy of students at this school is relatively low, as shown by behaviors such as flirting, lack of confidence, and apathy towards the difficulties of their peers. Although schools have a vision to develop students with noble character, the limited use of learning media and the dominance of traditional teaching methods hinder the optimization of students' affective development. This phenomenon creates a gap between the ideals of inclusive character education and classroom learning practices that do not fully humanize students.

A number of previous studies have explored the use of humanistic approaches in PAI. Study by Caroline (2025) and Fauzi et al (2025) shows that humanistic approaches effectively improve students' emotional intelligence at the high school level through active learning methods. Meanwhile, Maharani et al (2025) and Maulana et al (2025) Finding the benefits of this approach for students with special needs in inclusive schools. However, there is still a research gap, as previous research has focused more on elementary or urban school levels. There is not much literature that specifically explores the application of humanistic approaches at the junior high school level in rural areas with the One Roof model, which has unique geographical challenges and infrastructure limitations.

Finding the benefits of this approach for students with special needs in inclusive schools. However, there is still a research gap, as previous research has focused more on elementary or urban school levels. However, previous research has tended to focus on urban school contexts, elementary school levels, or strengthening emotional intelligence in general. There have not been many studies that specifically examine how the humanistic approach is implemented in PAI learning in rural one-stop junior high schools and how its psychological mechanisms in shaping students' social empathy. Therefore, the novelty of this research focuses on social empathy as the main affective outcome, the formulation of a gradual mechanism for the formation of empathy through three psychological phases, and the context of implementation in rural one-stop schools with limited facilities. This study aims to: (1) describe the implementation of a humanistic approach in PAI learning at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun; (2) analyze the mechanism of forming students' social empathy through this approach; (3) formulate the conceptual contribution of humanistic approaches in strengthening empathy characters in the context of rural schools.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive type of research. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the process of implementing humanistic approaches in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and its influence on the holistic improvement of students' social empathy. The descriptive method is used to describe the phenomena observed in the field systematically, factually, and accurately without intervening or changing existing conditions (Aalbert & Jr., 2016). The researchers sought to explore the interaction between teachers and students and describe the actual conditions of the learning process from the planning stage to implementation.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun. This research was carried out in the odd semester of the 2024/2025 school year with a span of approximately three months, namely from September to November 2024. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling techniques with consideration of direct involvement in the implementation of humanistic approaches. Research subjects consisting of 1 school principal, 1 Islamic Education teacher who applied a humanistic approach, and 28 eighth-graders at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun which directly experienced the learning process. In addition, data is obtained through supporting documents such as Lesson Plans (RPP), PAI syllabus, and documentation of school activities.

The main instrument in data collection is the researcher himself, supported by observation, interview, and documentation guidelines (Salmia, 2023). The observation technique was carried out in a participatory manner to directly observe the PAI learning process and students' social responses. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with PAI teachers to explore their perceptions and implementation constraints, and with students to find out their learning experiences. To ensure the validity of the data, the researchers applied triangulation techniques, both source triangulation and triangulation techniques.

The data analysis technique follows the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana qualitative analysis model, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification (Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, 2014). In the reduction stage, the data obtained from the field is summarized and focused on relevant parts that answer the formulation of problems related to humanistic approaches and social empathy. The data is then presented in the form of a descriptive narrative, table, or chart to facilitate understanding the patterns of relationships between variables. The final stage is the drawing of initial conclusions, which are continuously tested for validity through valid and consistent evidence found during the field data collection process until credible conclusions are reached.

Results and Discussion

This study explores the dynamics of the application of Carl Rogers' humanistic approach in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun. Empirical data obtained through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation were subtracted and presented in a matrix to map interaction patterns, subject perceptions, and determinants in the formation of students' social empathy. The results of this study systematically answer three research objectives. (1) The implementation of humanistic approaches can be seen in the reconstruction of the learning cycle oriented to psychological safety and open dialogue; (2) The formation of social empathy takes place through a gradual mechanism starting from the deconstruction of fear, cooperative social interaction, to the internalization of values through reflection; (3) conceptually, this research produces a humanistic-relational PAI learning model that places emotional relationships as the foundation for the formation of empathy characters.

Humanistic-Based Learning Cycle Reconstruction

Based on field observations, it was found that Islamic Education teachers have shifted their paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered. Teachers not only transfer theological knowledge, but also facilitate the emotional growth of students.

Table 1. Matrix of Humanistic Approach Implementation in the PAI Learning Cycle

Learning Stages	Description of Teacher Activities (Field Data)	Carl Rogers' Humanistic Principles	Psychological Implications of Students
Pre-Instructional (Opening Activity)	Emotional Presence: Examining the well-being and feelings of students, not just presence. Build a warm relationship before diving into the material.	Develop Good Relationships & Unconditional Positive Attention	Students feel recognized as whole individuals, lower their affective filters (anxiety) and build mental readiness.
Instructional (Core Activities)	Connecting <i>moral</i> (moral) lessons with real-life problems. Facilitate heterogeneous group discussions. Move as a facilitator, not a static lecturer.	Facilitation of Meaningful Learning & Learning	Intensive social interaction is established. Students learn to take perspective, which serves as the basis of empathy.
Post-Instructional (Closing Activity)	Collective Reflection: "How are you feeling today?" Provide positive reinforcement for participation. Correct misunderstandings without judgment.	Self-Evaluation & Confluence (Authenticity)	The internalization of values occurs when students reflect on their interaction experiences, rather than through memorization.

Table 1 shows the consistency of the application of Rogers' theory. In the early stages, teachers prioritize connection over correction. These findings are confirmed by interviews with teachers who state that they strive to create a comfortable, safe, and fun learning environment so that students feel valued. This approach breaks down rigid hierarchical boundaries, allowing students to feel psychologically secure.

Subject's Perception of the Learning Climate

The effectiveness of the humanistic approach was validated through triangulation of sources (teachers, students, principals) to see the congruence of perceptions.

Table 2. Research Subjects' Perceptions of the Academic and Social Climate

They report	Key Statements (verbatim)	Phenomenological Keywords	Meaning Analysis
Teacher	"Teachers are open, friendly, and non-authoritarian ... So that students are more courageous in expressing their opinions."	Non-authoritarian, Openness	The shift in the role of teachers from the only authority figure to an egalitarian learning partner.
FATHER	"I feel happy and more comfortable ... I don't feel depressed... Group activities make me more concerned about my friends."	Comfort, Stress-Free, Care	Indicates the elimination of learning anxiety. A sense of psychological security triggers social courage and emotional sensitivity (empathy).
Students	"The school encourages PAI teachers to implement friendly learning that respects students and pays attention to attitude development."	Learn to be Friendly, Respectful	Structural support that legitimizes a humanistic approach as part of the school's culture.
Principal			

The data in Table 2 show a positive correlation between the attitude of non-authoritarian teachers and students' feelings of comfort. Gustina Aulia specifically attributes this comfort to the

emergence of more caring behaviors towards friends. It confirms that social empathy does not arise from coercive instruction, but rather develops in a positive emotional climate.

Analysis of Determining Factors

The application of this approach is faced with complex realities in the field, particularly in integrated schools.

Table 3. Analysis of Supporting and Inhibiting Factors (*Field of Style Analysis*)

Category	Driving Force	Holding Strength	Teacher Mitigation Strategy
Human Resources	Teacher personality (patience and empathy); Full support from the Principal.	Student heterogeneity; Some students are passive/introverted; Lack of student confidence.	A personalized (one-on-one) approach for passive students; Implement peer tutoring in groups.
Instructional & Materials	PAI (<i>Moral</i>) material is very relevant to social life; Flexibility in discussion methods.	Limited allocation of teaching time (Lesson Hours); Demanding and dense curriculum requirements.	Time management efficiency; Focus on the essence of values rather than just material solutions.
Facilities & Environment	A school environment that is conducive to positive interactions.	Limited learning media (technology/teaching aids) in "One Roof" schools.	Utilizing social interaction as the main medium of learning.

Table 3 highlights that the biggest obstacle is not the physical facilities, but rather the passive culture of students (who just listen without daring to express their opinions). However, limited resources force teachers to rely more on the quality of human interaction (*Human touch*), which ironically reinforces the essence of humanistic education itself.

The findings of this study reinforce the relevance of Carl Rogers' theory in the context of contemporary PAI. Teachers at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun successfully practiced the three basic attitudes of Rogers therapists/educators: congruence, unconditional positive attention, and empathy. When teachers show a friendly and non-pushy attitude, they meet students' basic needs for security (Maslow).

From the perspective of educational neuroscience, students' brains that are in a comfortable condition (free from threats) will be more optimal in processing social and emotional information. This explains why students become more courageous in speaking and interacting. Teachers no longer position themselves as bankers who save knowledge (Paulo Freire criticizes), but as midwives who help give birth to the potential for empathy that already exists in students.

Based on the synthesis of field data, the formation of students' social empathy is not an instant process, but a gradual and dialectical psychological mechanism. This process begins with the deconstruction phase of fear. Teachers who are warm, communicative, and unconditionally accepting of students (asking how they are doing, being friendly, not authoritarian) serve to undermine the student's psychological defenses. As stated by informant Gustina Aulia, feeling unstressed and comfortable is the gateway to mental openness. In a state of psychological security, students no longer focus their psychic energy on protecting themselves from the threat of punishment, but instead begin to project their attention outward, that is, to their peers.

Furthermore, students enter the phase of intersubjective experience through cooperative learning methods. Teachers' strategies to heterogeneously group students force positive social friction. In this discussion room, students not only learn moral theory, but also directly experience the

dynamics of mutual need. When students actively help friends who have difficulty understanding the material, a phenomenon recorded in observation, the process of taking perspective is actually underway. Students learn to sense the difficulties of others and respond with real help. This is where Rogers' experiential learning theory finds its relevance; Empathy grows because it's practiced in real social relationships, not because it's memorized from textbooks.

This process culminates in the internalization phase of values, where these emotional experiences are crystallized into character through reflection. The closing activity, which provides space for students to express their feelings and impressions of learning, serves as a cognitive reinforcement that their behavior of helping each other is something of noble value. Thus, social empathy is formed through the following sequence: the sense of security (of the teacher) triggers the courage to interact, interaction (with friends) triggers the experience of feeling the feelings of others, and reflection reinforces that experience into a lasting character trait.

The context of One Roof school, which is often associated with limited facilities, actually provides a unique atmosphere in this study. The lack of advanced technology makes face-to-face interactions more intense. The success of teachers in overcoming passive student constraints and time constraints with patience and exemplary behavior proves that in a humanistic approach, the main instrument is the personality of the teacher himself (Teachers as instruments).

The results of the study show that the application of a humanistic approach in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun is able to create a learning climate that is more empathetic, dialogical, and oriented towards the emotional development of students. The shift from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach not only impacts student engagement in the learning process but also fosters social empathy through more intensive and meaningful interactions.

These findings reinforce Carl Rogers' humanistic theory, which emphasizes the importance of three basic educators' attitudes, namely congruence, unconditional positive attention, and empathy, in creating a psychologically safe learning environment. In this study, PAI teachers showed a friendly and non-authoritarian attitude and provided space for students to reflect, thus meeting their basic needs for security and appreciation. This safe psychological environment allows students to be more open in their interactions, be brave enough to express their opinions, and begin to develop concern for their peers.

Conceptually, these findings are consistent with research by Widyawati et al (2025), which shows that a humanistic approach can simultaneously improve motivation and learning outcomes by creating a positive emotional connection between teachers and students. This study confirms that when students feel emotionally valued and learning is considered meaningful, intrinsic motivation increases significantly, which ultimately affects cognitive engagement.

In the context of this research, the increase in students' social empathy can be understood as a logical consequence of creating a safe, supportive, and appreciative learning environment. In addition, the results of the study also show that students' social empathy is not formed instantly, but through a gradual psychological mechanism that begins with the deconstruction phase of fear, then develops into more open social interaction, and culminates in the internalization of values through reflection. This process shows that the formation of empathetic characters is not only the result of the cognitive delivery of moral material, but also the result of emotional and social experiences experienced directly in the learning process.

These findings also reinforce criticism of conventional learning models that are mechanistic and memorization-oriented. In this study, teachers are no longer positioned as knowledge banks, but rather as facilitators who help develop the potential for empathy that already exists in students. This approach is in line with a humanistic pedagogical perspective that places students as active and intact subjects with optimal development potential. (Zhen & Ali, 2024).

These findings reinforce research by Caroline (2025) and Widyawati et al. (2025), which shows that a humanistic approach through active learning is highly effective in honing students' emotional intelligence. In addition, the effectiveness of using this collaboration method is in line with the findings Maharani et al (2025), where role-playing strategies and group discussions successfully create an inclusive atmosphere that supports holistic character development.

An interesting finding in this study is that the limited facilities in rural one-stop schools are not an obstacle but rather a catalyst for intense face-to-face interaction. The lack of technology actually strengthens the human touch aspect of pedagogical relationships. This phenomenon provides a new perspective that complements the study of Rainfall et al (2025), which previously explored humanistic leadership in formal urban school settings or early childhood inclusive schools. This research proves that the originality of the humanistic approach lies in the quality of human relationships, not in the sophistication of infrastructure.

Based on the synthesis of findings, this study offers a conceptual idea in the form of a humanistic-relational PAI learning model that places emotional relationships as the main foundation for the formation of students' social empathy. This model departs from the gradual mechanisms found in the research, namely: (1) the creation of a sense of security through teachers' empathetic attitudes, (2) open social interaction in learning activities, and (3) internalization of values through collective reflection.

This conceptual model shows that social empathy is not just the result of cognitive learning of values, but rather the result of the relational experiences that students have in a safe and supportive learning environment. Therefore, PAI learning needs to be directed not only at mastering religious materials, but also at creating meaningful social-emotional experiences. This idea can be further developed in future research, for example, through quantitative testing of models, learning experiments, or the development of structured humanistic-based learning tools.

The focus of the application of humanistic approaches in Islamic education to improve the social empathy of students in rural integrated schools is the originality of this research. This context has rarely been examined in previous studies, which generally focused on urban schools or other levels of education. The novelty of this research can be seen from several aspects. First, this study not only assesses the effectiveness of humanistic approaches to cognitive aspects or learning motivation but also specifically examines its impact on students' social empathy as a more profound affective outcome. Second, this study succeeded in formulating the psychological mechanism of empathy formation through three phases, namely fear deconstruction, social interaction, and internalization of values. Third, this study shows that the limited facilities in rural schools are not always an obstacle, but can be a context that strengthens the essence of a humanistic approach based on interpersonal relationships.

Theoretically, this study expands the study of humanistic Islamic pedagogy by placing social empathy as an indicator of learning success. Practically, this study provides an alternative strategy for Islamic Education teachers in creating a more dialogical, inclusive, and character-oriented classroom atmosphere. Thus, this research makes a new contribution, both conceptually and contextually, to the development of humanistic approaches in Islamic Education learning, especially in school settings with limited resources but strong social connections.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study shows that the application of a humanistic approach in Islamic Religious Education at SMP Negeri Satu Atap 13 Sarolangun is able to create a more dialogical learning climate that is psychologically safe and oriented to the emotional development of students. The shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning has been shown to increase social engagement and students' courage in interacting. The teacher's friendly, non-authoritarian

attitude and the provision of space for reflection play an important role in fostering a sense of security, so that students are more open, confident, and begin to show concern for their peers. Theoretically, this study expands the study of humanistic Islamic pedagogy by placing social empathy as the main indicator of the success of affective learning. This study not only confirms the relevance of Carl Rogers' theory in the context of PAI, but also formulates a psychological mechanism of empathy formation that has not been systematically elaborated in similar studies before. Practically, this study provides an implementive model for PAI teachers in schools with limited resources to optimize the quality of pedagogical relationships as the main instrument of character formation. Contextually, this study shows that the limitations of facilities are not always an obstacle, but can strengthen the intensity of humanistic interaction that is the core of relationship-based learning.

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