

Evaluating the Islamic Religious Education Program in Inclusive Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays an important role in fostering religious awareness, moral development, and social character during early childhood. The implementation of IRE in inclusive Early Childhood Education (ECE), however, continues to face challenges related to teacher readiness, adaptive learning practices, and the evaluation of learning outcomes for children with diverse developmental characteristics. This study aimed to evaluate the implementation of the IRE program in inclusive ECE institutions in Balikpapan City using the Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) evaluation model. A qualitative evaluative approach was employed. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving school principals, classroom teachers, special needs assistant teachers, and educational supervisors. Data analysis followed an interactive process consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that inclusive IRE practices have developed positively despite the absence of formal local regulations governing inclusive ECE. Significant challenges remain in teacher competencies, adaptive assessment practices, and the limited availability of special needs assistant teachers. Learning activities grounded in play, habituation, storytelling, emotional engagement, and direct religious practice were found to support the internalization of religious values and the development of children's social behavior. The evaluation further indicates that learning implementation remains highly dependent on individual teacher initiatives and lacks a structured conceptual framework for inclusive IRE. These findings highlight the need to strengthen teacher capacity in inclusive pedagogy, develop more adaptive and holistic assessment systems, and formulate an inclusive IRE model that integrates Islamic educational values, child-centered learning, and neurodiversity perspectives. The study contributes to the advancement of inclusive Islamic education by providing empirical evidence for the development of more equitable, adaptive, and humanistic learning environments in early childhood settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a strategic role as the foundation for children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and spiritual development. Early childhood represents the most fundamental phase of human development, during which children learn through observation, imitation, and interaction with their surrounding environment (Sriandila and



Suryana 2022;Rodiah, Zulaika, and Saputra 2024). Therefore, ECE learning must be designed holistically through the integration of cognitive, emotional, and social aspects in the educational process. From the perspective of Islamic education, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in ECE does not merely introduce religious teachings but also shapes character, noble morals, and religious habits through integrated habituation in learning activities, supported by the exemplary roles of teachers and parents (Janah & Maulidin, 2024; Mukarromah et al., 2025).

In line with contemporary educational paradigms, inclusive education has become a key principle in the provision of equitable ECE services for all learners, including children with special needs (ABK). Inclusive education not only supports the academic and social development of ABK but also fosters empathy, tolerance, and social solidarity in an equal learning environment (Hayati et al., 2023; Wulandari & Harsiwi, 2024). However, the implementation of the IRE program in inclusive ECE still faces challenges in the dimension of learning evaluation. Evaluation plays a crucial role in measuring the attainment of learning objectives, assessing the effectiveness of methods, and providing constructive feedback to teachers and learners in determining appropriate instructional strategies (Boroallo & Purnamasari, 2025; Rangkuti & Albina, 2025).

Since evaluation in inclusive ECE cannot be standardized uniformly between regular students and ABK, teachers must adaptively adjust instruments, time, and assessment techniques through collaboration with special needs assistants (Melania et al., 2023; Natasha & Prasetyaningtyas, 2022). However, teachers' limited understanding of inclusion principles, combined with inadequate pedagogical and psychological competencies in handling ABK, remains a primary challenge for inclusive education in Indonesia (Ayub et al., 2026; Faiqoh et al., 2025; Isyara et al., 2025). This indicates that the success of inclusive evaluation depends heavily on teachers' readiness to understand the holistic needs and development of their learners.

The Merdeka Curriculum policy opens opportunities for more adaptive IRE learning development; however, its implementation still faces limitations in infrastructure, teacher literacy, and teachers' readiness to integrate character assessment, spirituality, and the individual needs of ABK (Atikah & Sari, 2025; Indriana et al., 2026; Wahyudin et al., 2024). In this context, the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) evaluation model is considered relevant as it enables comprehensive program evaluation covering resource readiness, learning processes, and program outcomes holistically (Asmawati et al., 2025; Rahmat & Ambiyar, 2025; Suharjo & Zakir, 2021).

In addition to formal evaluation, IRE learning in inclusive ECE is also influenced by the hidden curriculum through school culture, social interaction, and teacher exemplarity, all of which contribute to shaping children's religious and social character (Husna & Abdur Rahman Nor Afif Hamid, 2025; Santoso et al., 2025). However, previous studies show that IRE evaluation for ABK remains rudimentary typically limited to observation or anecdotal records (Ayub et al., 2026). This reveals a significant research gap regarding comprehensive program evaluation of IRE in inclusive ECE. Therefore, this study is important to integrate the perspectives of Islamic education, inclusive education, and program evaluation to improve the quality of adaptive and holistic IRE learning in Balikpapan City.

Despite the growing body of literature on inclusive education and Islamic Religious Education (IRE), existing studies have primarily focused on learning strategies, teacher readiness, curriculum implementation, and the social development of children with special needs. Research examining the evaluation of IRE programs in inclusive Early Childhood Education (ECE) remains limited, particularly studies employing a comprehensive evaluation framework that assesses contextual conditions, resource readiness, instructional processes, and learning outcomes simultaneously. Previous investigations have also tended to concentrate on specific aspects of assessment practices or classroom implementation without integrating the broader dimensions of program effectiveness. Furthermore, little attention

has been given to how inclusive IRE accommodates neurodiversity and adapts religious learning to the developmental characteristics of children with special needs within early childhood settings. These limitations indicate a significant gap in understanding the overall quality and effectiveness of IRE programs in inclusive ECE environments.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of Islamic education, inclusive pedagogy, and program evaluation through the application of the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) model to evaluate IRE implementation in inclusive ECE. Unlike previous studies that mainly emphasize instructional practices or learner outcomes, this research provides a holistic evaluation of the program by examining institutional readiness, teacher competencies, learning processes, and educational outcomes within an inclusive framework. In addition, this study incorporates perspectives of child-centered learning, neurodiversity, and the hidden curriculum to explain how religious values are internalized among children with diverse developmental characteristics. By positioning inclusive IRE as both a pedagogical and developmental process, this study offers a broader conceptual understanding of how Islamic education can be implemented adaptively and equitably in early childhood settings.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to evaluate the implementation of the Islamic Religious Education program in inclusive Early Childhood Education institutions in Balikpapan City using the CIPP evaluation model. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the contextual conditions supporting inclusive IRE, assess the readiness of human and institutional resources, analyze the implementation of learning and evaluation processes, and evaluate the program's contribution to the religious and social development of learners. Through this evaluation, the study is expected to provide empirical evidence and practical recommendations for strengthening adaptive, inclusive, and child-centered IRE practices, while contributing to the development of more comprehensive models of Islamic education for inclusive early childhood contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative evaluative approach using the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) model to evaluate the implementation of IRE learning in inclusive ECE at Yayasan Unique Brain Homeschooling and TK Putra Balikpapan, conducted during April–May 2026 (Rahmat & Ambiyar, 2025). This approach was used to directly describe the conditions of learning, evaluation, and accompaniment of children with special needs in the inclusive classroom environment (Creswell, 2015).

Research subjects consisted of classroom teachers and special needs assistant teachers (GPK), selected using purposive sampling based on teaching experience and involvement in IRE learning evaluation in inclusive classrooms (Creswell, 2015). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation including teaching modules, children's developmental records, and learning activities. Research instruments utilized the human instrument approach supported by interview guides and observation sheets developed based on principles of validity and reliability (Retnawati, 2016).

Data validity was established through source triangulation, method triangulation, member checking, and audit trail (Creswell, 2015). Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation and effectiveness of IRE learning evaluation in inclusive ECE (Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, 2023). To facilitate understanding of the research process, the following research flowchart is presented:

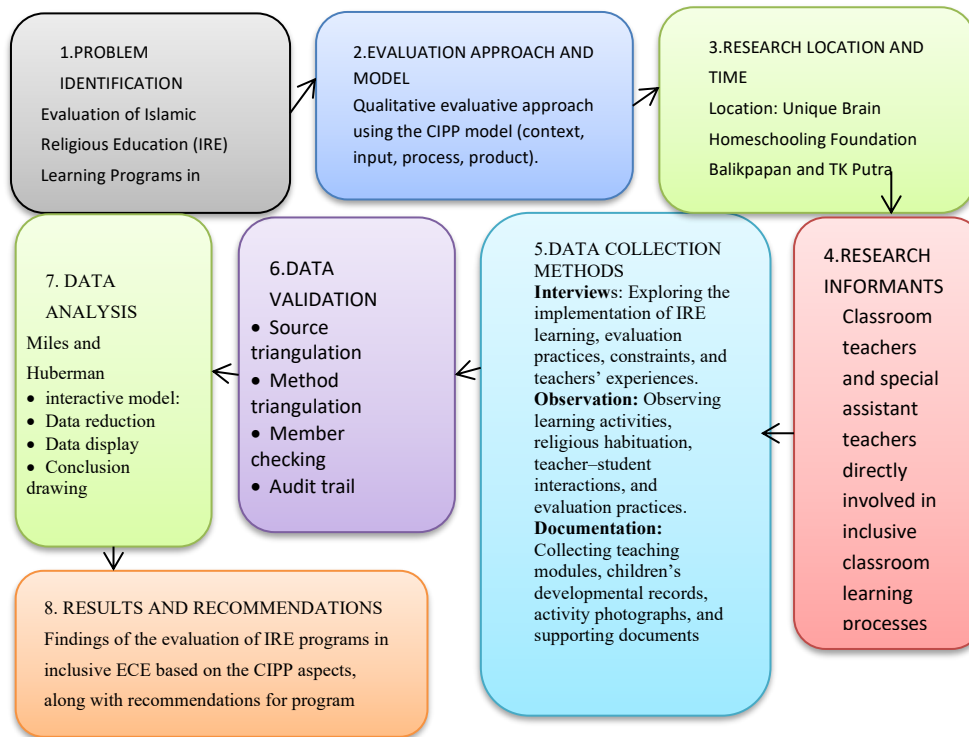


Figure 1. Research Flowchart

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The program evaluation in this study was conducted to describe the implementation of IRE learning in inclusive ECE in Balikpapan City, based on interview and observation results at Yayasan Unique Brain Homeschooling Balikpapan, TK Putra Balikpapan, and the Head of RA Supervisors of Balikpapan City. The evaluation was directed at four main components of the CIPP model: context, input, process, and product.

Context Evaluation

Context evaluation focused on the alignment of the IRE program with learner needs and institutional conditions. Based on interviews with the Head of RA Supervisors of Balikpapan City, there is currently no formally structured inclusive ECE institution in Balikpapan; however, inclusive practices have begun to develop across various ECE and RA institutions. The informant stated: "*Specifically, there is no formal inclusive ECE yet, but now almost all ECE institutions have started accepting children with special needs* (Head of RA Supervisors, Interview, April 2026)."

In the context of IRE learning, material delivered to ABK remains simple, placing greater emphasis on basic habituation, introduction to religious values, and individual approaches rather than uniform academic targets. Assessment between regular students and ABK is differentiated based on each child's individual development. Although no formal local inclusion regulation exists, ECE institutions in Balikpapan have shown a positive response to the presence of ABK.

Input Evaluation

Input evaluation focused on the readiness of resources including teacher competencies, learning media, and institutional support. Interview results with the Principal of TK Putra Balikpapan revealed that inclusion implementation still faces significant challenges, particularly in terms of teacher competence and parental collaboration: "*Teachers still find it difficult to align perceptions with parents regarding the handling of children with special needs*

(Principal of TK Putra, Interview, April 2026). "Ideally, children with special needs should have a dedicated special needs assistant teacher, but due to parents' economic constraints, this has not been fully achievable (Principal of TK Putra, Interview, April 2026)."

From the perspective of Unique Brain Homeschooling, the input approach applied differs markedly. GPK teacher Shafna Cahya Sandrina explained that the institution implements a 'Learning by Heart & Brain' strategy learning that follows the child's developmental rhythm, prioritizes sensory comfort, and focuses on functional independence. The curriculum is transformed into play activities tailored to each child's learning style, enabling religious values to be naturally absorbed. This finding illustrates a significant capacity gap between institutions: one has developed a structured adaptive approach, while the other remains in a transitional phase.

Process Evaluation

Process evaluation focused on IRE learning implementation and teacher strategies in accompanying inclusive learners. Interviews with the GPK teacher at Unique Brain Homeschooling revealed that IRE learning emphasizes religious value habituation, basic worship introduction, character formation, and an emotional approach rather than formal academic targets: "Religious learning for children with special needs uses more play, storytelling, direct practice, and an emotional approach so that children can understand more easily (GA Anik Pratiwi, GPK Unique Brain, Interview, 16 April 2026)." "Children cannot be equalized, so learning must follow each child's ability and character (GA Anik Pratiwi, GPK Unique Brain, Interview, 16 April 2026)."

Teacher Shafna Cahya Sandrina further explained that the key to Unique Brain's learning process is flexibility: the institution does not force children to follow the curriculum but instead adapts the delivery of the curriculum to suit the way each child's brain works. Inclusion is understood not as uniformity, but as acceptance and adaptation the system changes to meet the child's needs, not the reverse. At TK Putra, however, teachers still face limitations in designing adaptive assessments, as not all teachers have received adequate inclusive education training.

Product Evaluation

Product evaluation aimed to assess the program's impact on learners' development. Based on all data collected, the IRE program in inclusive ECE in Balikpapan City has demonstrably contributed positively to the development of children's religious values and social behavior. Shafna Cahya Sandrina offered the following perspective on the true indicators of success: "The most fundamental indicator of success is when religion becomes the child's identity when they grow into individuals who are not only cognitively intelligent, but also have hearts deeply connected to divine values (Shafna Cahya Sandrina, GPK Teacher Unique Brain, Interview, April 2026)." Product evaluation at Unique Brain is qualitative and continuous, with success measured by each child's personal progress in making religious values part of their daily identity and habits. This reflects a long-term character formation orientation rather than mere formal competency achievement. Table 1 summarizes the CIPP evaluation findings.

Table 1. Summary of IRE Program Evaluation Findings Based on the CIPP Model

Dimension	Key Findings	Strengths	Challenges
Context	No formal inclusive ECE regulation at local level, inclusive practices have organically emerged in various institutions	Positive institutional response to the presence of children with special needs, differentiated learning for ABK and regular students	Absence of structured formal framework, inconsistent standards across institutions
Input	Capacity gap between institutions: Unique Brain applies adaptive Learning by Heart & Brain' strategy, TK Putra still in transition	Structured and adaptive curriculum at Unique Brain, individualized learning aligned with each child's learning style	Limited teacher competency, difficulty aligning with parents, lack of special needs assistants (GPK) due to economic constraints

Process	IRE delivered through play, storytelling, direct practice, and emotional approach, system adapts to child, not vice versa	High flexibility; neurodiversity-based approach, meaningful religious habituation through positive emotional experiences	Unstandardized implementation; limited adaptive assessment skills, not all teachers trained in inclusive education
Product	IRE contributes positively to children's religious character formation and social behaviour, religion becomes part of identity	Long-term character orientation, qualitative and continuous evaluation, progress measured by personal growth	Success indicators not yet standardized, reliance on teacher intuition rather than systematic evaluation instruments

Discussion

The program evaluation results indicate that IRE learning in inclusive ECE in Balikpapan City has moved toward a humanistic and adaptive approach, although it remains in a transitional phase toward more systematic and model-based implementation. This finding is consistent with who found that the CIPP evaluation model is effective for evaluating inclusive ECE learning, and that learning planning requires close coordination between teachers and therapists to produce adaptive programs for ABK.

The research findings reveal that the internalization of religious values in ABK is more effective through play, storytelling, songs, direct worship practice, and emotional approaches. This aligns with Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory, which explains that early childhood children are at the preoperational stage, so learning must be concrete and experience-based (Jean Piaget, 2020). The play and simple worship practice approaches used by teachers represent the practical implementation of the learning by doing principle in early childhood education.

The concept of Islamic education according to Imam Al-Ghazali also supports this finding: education for early childhood must be carried out through habituation and exemplary behavior (Al-Ghazali, 2020). GPK teachers at Unique Brain emphasized that religious values are introduced through play activities and positive habituation targeting children's emotions, so that these values naturally permeate into character without cognitive pressure. This reinforces the view that children's moral and spiritual development grows through social experiences and emotional interaction, not through formal knowledge transfer (Husna & Abdur Rahman Nor Afif Hamid, 2025; Santoso et al., 2025).

This study identifies a significant paradigm shift at Unique Brain Homeschooling, from a uniform learning model toward a child-centered learning approach that acknowledges the principle of neurodiversity. This shift is reflected in the institution's philosophy: inclusion at Unique Brain is about acceptance and adaptation the institution changes its system to meet the child's needs, not the other way around. This perspective aligns with the principle of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which asserts that learning must be designed flexibly to accommodate the diversity of learners (Malik & Prabowo, 2024).

However, this shift has not occurred uniformly across all institutions. TK Putra Balikpapan still faces challenges in aligning perceptions with parents, and not all teachers possess adequate competencies for inclusive education. This indicates that the success of inclusive education is influenced by various environmental factors, as explained in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, where the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem collectively determine the quality of educational services received by children.

One of the most prominent findings in this study is the structural barrier of limited special needs assistant teachers (GPK) caused by family economic factors. The principal of TK Putra explicitly stated that ideally every ABK should have a dedicated GPK, but parents' economic constraints constitute the primary obstacle. This finding reinforces the view that the success of inclusion is not merely a pedagogical issue but also a matter of social justice and policy that must be addressed systematically by policymakers (Faiqoh et al., 2025; Lamadang et al., 2024). It also underscores the need for policy support in the form of GPK

subsidies or community-based accompaniment systems to address economic barriers without compromising ABK's right to quality education.

The research findings also confirm the strategic role of the hidden curriculum in shaping children's religious character in inclusive ECE. Social interaction among learners, teacher exemplarity, and the inclusive institutional culture organically shape values of tolerance, empathy, and solidarity, which are the core of Islamic teachings. GPK teacher Shafna even stated that IRE learning at Unique Brain demonstrates that inclusion is the concrete embodiment of Islamic justice. This reinforces the perspective that the hidden curriculum in Islamic education is not merely a by-product of learning, but a core component that must be consciously designed and evaluated (Khoiroh & Fatkhurrohman, 2024).

Overall, the research findings demonstrate that adaptive IRE learning in inclusive ECE is not yet supported by a systematic conceptual model. Teachers still rely on approaches based on individual experience and intuition, without structured pedagogical guidelines. This indicates an urgent need for the development of an adaptive IRE conceptual learning model that integrates: (1) early childhood development theory; (2) inclusive education principles; (3) Islamic education values and objectives; and (4) a neurodiversity perspective in learning. The development of this model would provide a stronger foundation for teachers in designing and evaluating IRE learning that is adaptive, equitable, and oriented toward children's holistic development (Asmawati et al., 2025; Suharjo & Zakir, 2021).

This study offers theoretical and practical contributions to the development of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in inclusive ECE through the integration of the CIPP evaluation model with Islamic educational approaches and inclusive pedagogy. It enriches previous studies by presenting perspectives on child-centered learning, hidden curriculum, and holistic development of children with special needs in IRE learning. Furthermore, the findings provide practical contributions in the form of recommendations for developing more adaptive, humanistic, and contextual IRE learning and evaluation models for inclusive ECE institutions in Indonesia.

This study has limitations in its scope of location and number of informants, focused only on several inclusive ECE institutions in Balikpapan City; therefore, the findings are contextual and cannot be broadly generalized. Additionally, program evaluation was based on a qualitative approach through interviews, observation, and documentation, making it highly influenced by the experiences, perceptions, and field conditions during the study. A further limitation lies in the absence of an established inclusive IRE evaluation model as a benchmark for more in-depth analysis of program implementation.

Future research is recommended to develop more adaptive conceptual models and IRE evaluation instruments for children with special needs in inclusive ECE. Research can also be expanded to more educational institutions using a mixed-methods approach to obtain a more comprehensive picture of inclusive IRE learning effectiveness. Strengthened collaboration among teachers, parents, and policymakers also needs to be examined further to support the development of an inclusive, humanistic, and holistic Islamic educational system for early childhood development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning in inclusive Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Balikpapan City remains in a transitional phase toward a more adaptive, child-centered, and inclusive approach. The CIPP-based evaluation revealed that inclusive practices have developed despite the absence of formal regulatory frameworks, although significant challenges persist, particularly in teacher competencies, adaptive assessment skills, and the limited availability of special needs assistant teachers (GPK). The learning process, which emphasizes play, habituation, storytelling, emotional engagement, and direct practice, has proven effective in fostering religious values and social character development among children, including those with special needs, despite the lack of standardized implementation and evaluation mechanisms. The findings reinforce theoretical

perspectives that moral and spiritual development emerges through social experiences, emotional interactions, and adaptive learning environments, while extending existing scholarship by integrating child-centered learning and neurodiversity perspectives into inclusive IRE. Therefore, strengthening teacher competencies, developing holistic and adaptive assessment systems, formulating a structured inclusive IRE model that integrates Islamic pedagogy with inclusive education principles, and providing policy support through GPK subsidies and more comprehensive inclusion regulations are essential for improving program quality and ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all children.

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