

Islamic religious education for children of Indonesian migrant workers: adaptive strategies at the Indonesian school guidance center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Abstract: This study aims to identify and analyze various adaptive strategies in teaching Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at Sanggar Bimbingan (SB) in the Kuala Lumpur area, Malaysia. Undocumented children of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) face massive structural marginalization that closes their access to formal education. In these highly limited conditions, Sanggar Bimbingan serves as a crucial alternative educational space to prevent the "lost generation" phenomenon. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with data triangulation techniques involving a survey of eight International KKN practitioners across seven learning center locations, in-depth interviews with managers, and documentation studies of learning reports. The research results reveal that educators implement five main adaptive strategies as the pillars of learning: (1) curriculum transformation through functional material simplification focusing on daily worship practices; (2) the application of multigrade teaching to circumvent space limitations and teacher-to-student ratios; (3) differentiated instruction tailored to individual students' literacy levels and learning readiness; (4) a psychospiritual approach through emotional validation as an instrument for trauma healing due to psychosocial vulnerabilities; and (5) the integration of religious nationalism values to strengthen the Indonesian national identity in transnational areas. The study concludes that Adaptive Pedagogy which is flexible, crisis-responsive, and based on humanistic empathy is the key to educational resilience in marginal spaces. This strategy has proven effective not only in transferring religious knowledge but also in maintaining mental health and ensuring the continuity of students' academic rights through the legality of diploma documents. This research recommends the need to strengthen digital literacy and more adequate instructional facilities to optimize education for migrant children in the future.

Keywords: Islamic religious education, adaptive learning strategies, children of Indonesian migrant workers, Indonesian school guidance center, transnational education context.

Article History: Submitted 19 January 2026; Revised 25 April 2026; Accepted: 25 April 2026; Published online 29 April 2026

Introduction

The phenomenon of labor migration in Southeast Asia has presented profound humanitarian challenges, particularly regarding the fulfillment of the right to education for the children of undocumented Indonesian migrant workers (PMI). In Malaysia, structural barriers such as the lack of birth certificates and permanent residence permits remain the primary obstacles preventing these children from accessing public schools, thereby placing them at risk of becoming a "lost generation" (Agustina & Azizah, 2024; Hidayat et al., 2023; Tambak et al., 2025). This situation is exacerbated by rigid domestic policies, making the Sanggar Bimbingan (SB) initiative crucial as an alternative educational space that bridges human rights with national sovereignty (Firdausiyah et al., 2025; Abdullah et al., 2025).

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How to cite: Robbani, I., & Mulyah, P. (2026). Islamic religious education for children of Indonesian migrant workers: adaptive strategies at the Indonesian school guidance center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. *Jurnal Pendidikan Agama Islam Al-Thariqah*, 11(1), 111–120.

[https://doi.org/10.25299/al-thariqah.2025.vol11\(1\).27034](https://doi.org/10.25299/al-thariqah.2025.vol11(1).27034)

Several previous studies have explored this issue from various perspectives. First, Agustina & Azizah (2024) highlighted the government's diplomatic strategies for protecting the educational rights of migrant workers' children at the macro level. Second, Hidayat et al. (2023) mapped structural barriers and educational accessibility for migrants in Peninsular Malaysia. Third, Muttaqin et al. (2024) analyzed the role of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) as an "anchor of identity" for the diaspora. Fourth, Naparan & Alinsug (2021) discussed the effectiveness of multigrade teaching methods in schools with limited resources. Fifth, Surachman & Kusmawati (2025) emphasize the importance of innovative PAI modules based on adaptive learning. Sixth, Wahidah & Barokah (2024) reveal that a humanistic approach is highly effective in building resilience among marginalized children. Seventh, Haryanto & Sulianti (2023) underscore that language barriers and cultural adaptation often pose major obstacles in the learning process of transnational communities.

Although this research has provided a strong foundation, there are significant gaps in the literature. The majority of previous studies have focused on diplomatic policies and general educational management (Abdullah et al., 2025; Firdaus et al., 2025; Chapakiya et al., 2025; Tambak & Sukenti, 2025), but few have examined at a micro level how PAI instructional strategies are adaptively negotiated amid facility constraints (Kusumastuti et al., 2024). The novelty of this study lies in the introduction of the "Adaptive Pedagogy" model, which specifically integrates emotional validation with multigrade teaching techniques (Wirya et al., 2025) and the use of simple technology as an inclusive solution (Tambak et al., 2025). Through the involvement of International Community Service Program (KKN) student practicum participants, this study examines how the implementation of these strategies can transform limitations into strengths of students' mental resilience.

This study aims to identify and analyze various adaptive strategies in teaching Islamic Education at Sanggar Bimbingan, ranging from curriculum simplification to mental health approaches for students. Practically, this study serves as a methodological guide for volunteer teachers in managing heterogeneous classes in transnational settings. Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of literature on inclusive Islamic education, emphasizing that successful learning in marginalized spaces heavily depends on curricular flexibility and psychospiritual resilience.

Literature review

The Right to Education for Children of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI)

From a macro perspective, the fulfillment of the right to education for the children of Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) in Malaysia is caught between universal human rights norms and the legal sovereignty of the host country. Although the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UNESCO Convention oppose discrimination in education and guarantee the right to education without discrimination (Convention Against Discrimination In Education, 1960; CRC, 1989), the reality on the ground reveals massive structural barriers. Malaysia's domestic policies, particularly the Immigration Act 1959/63 and the Education Act 1996, restrict access to public schools to citizens or those with valid documentation, effectively barring thousands of children of migrant workers who are undocumented or stateless (Education Act 1996, 2006; Immigration Act 1959/63, 2006). In response to this, the Indonesian government adheres to Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which mandates that the state guarantee access to education for all citizens wherever they may be (National Education System Law, 2003). Therefore, the establishment of the Indonesian School in Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) and the expansion of access through Learning Centers (SB) have become crucial solutions to save children from the threat of becoming a "lost generation" and to ensure their constitutional rights are fulfilled amidst the legal limitations of the local jurisdiction (Sri et al., n.d.).

Sanggar bimbingan (guidance studio)

Sanggar Bimbingan (SB) is a non-formal educational institution with unique characteristics that set it apart from typical formal schools. If the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur (SIKL) is a well-established parent institution with standard facilities, civil servant teachers, and a strict schedule, then SB is its antithesis: operating informally in shop houses or community halls, with

limited facilities, volunteer teachers, and flexible learning hours to accommodate the circumstances of children who often have to work. Nevertheless, the relationship between SB and SIKL is very close and of an affiliative-structural nature. SIKL acts as the parent school, providing academic supervision, access to the Basic Education Data System (Dapodik), and facilitating equivalency exams so that SB students can obtain a National Student Identification Number (NISN). This relationship gives rise to the context of the “Adaptive Strategy,” in which the national curriculum is not applied rigidly but is modified and simplified by SB administrators to make it relevant to the limitations of resources and students’ basic literacy needs, without compromising the minimum competency standards set by SIKL.

The Essence and Transformation of Islamic Religious Education

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) fundamentally aims to help individuals achieve the state of *Insan Kamil* (the perfect human being). In other words, a person who possesses a balance between intellectual, emotional, and spiritual intelligence. The dimensions of PAI encompass *Tarbiyah* (guidance/mentoring), *Ta’lim* (instruction), and *Ta’dib* (the cultivation of manners and morality). However, in the context of migrant workers’ children living as undocumented minorities, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a far more strategic role than merely being a required subject in the national curriculum. Diaspora studies literature indicates that for migrant children, PAI functions as a vital “anchor of identity” for preserving their culture of origin amidst the pressures of assimilation into foreign cultures (Muttaqin et al., 2024). PAI not only transmits knowledge of *fiqh* or creed but also serves as a reinforcer of religious nationalism and a mechanism for mental resilience. Through the internalization of religious values such as patience and *tawakkal*, as well as regular worship practices, PAI helps these children build psychological resilience in the face of the trauma of poverty, the stigma of illegality, and the uncertainty of the future, making religion the primary source of strength for survival (coping mechanism).

Adaptive Learning Strategies

Theories of adaptive learning strategies and responsive pedagogy serve as the primary analytical tools for examining the educational process at Sanggar Bimbingan, which operates under resource-constrained conditions. Adaptive strategies are defined as educators’ ability to dynamically modify methods, media, and assessments in response to environmental constraints, such as heterogeneous classes and a scarcity of teaching materials. One relevant form of implementation in the context of resource constraints is Multigrade Teaching. A study by Naparan and Alinsug (2021) defines this approach as teaching students comprising two or more different grade levels, where the teacher acts as a central role model in facilitating this diversity. The application of this model requires differentiated instruction as an adaptive solution, where teachers provide different activities according to students’ abilities and learning styles so that every child’s learning needs are optimally met (Napanan & Alinsug, 2021).

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-analytical case study design to explore adaptive educational strategies at the Sanggar Bimbingan (SB). Data were collected through comprehensive triangulation techniques, including field surveys of eight International Community Service Learning (KKN) student interns stationed at seven different locations: SB At-Tanzil in Kota Damansara, Serdang, Putra Kajang, Hicom, Jalan Kebun, Cheras, and Desa Mentari. In addition to the surveys, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with center administrators and classroom teachers to uncover the narratives behind curriculum simplification and the psychosocial challenges faced by students. Extensive documentary research was also conducted on institutional profiles, learning practice reports, and psychosocial literature regarding the mental health of undocumented migrant children in Malaysia. All collected data were then analyzed using an interactive model that included data condensation, data presentation in the form of tables and descriptive narratives, and the drawing of conclusions (Miles et al., 2014). Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques to guarantee

objectivity and a comprehensive understanding of the educational ecosystem for the children of Indonesian migrant workers.

Results

Based on an analysis of survey data from student teachers specifically, eight students participating in the Community Service Program (KKN) at various Guidance Centers (SB) several key patterns were identified regarding the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) using adaptive strategies. The survey results are summarized as follows:

Table 1. Survey results: strategies and challenges

Strategic Indicators and Challenges	Number in Favor (S/SS)	Percentage (%)
Curriculum Adaptation and Evaluation		
Islamic Education (PAI) content has been simplified from the official curriculum	8	100%
Assessment based on attitude and character (not just grades)	8	100%
Integrated learning of national values	8	100%
Emphasis on religious practices and the Quran compared to theory	6	75%
Adaptive Learning Methods		
Use of flexible teaching methods	8	100%
Switching to games, quizzes, or storytelling when students become bored	8	100%
Utilizing simple technology (smartphones/videos) as teaching tools	8	100%
Spending time validating students' emotions	7	87,5%
Grouping students of different ages with different tasks	5	62,5%
Using peer-tutoring strategies (study groups)	4	50%
Identification of Field Challenges		
Migrant family background influences motivation	7	87,5%
Difficulty managing the class due to a significant age gap	6	75%
Fluctuating student attendance (lessons are often interrupted)	5	62,5%
Limited availability of textbooks and printed materials	4	50%
Language or cultural barriers (Malay accent)	3	37,5%

Table 2. Survey analysis results

Category	Description of Field Findings
Key Issues	Significant disparities in students' ages and abilities within a single classroom; Limited availability of textbooks and learning materials; Motivation and concentration in learning influenced by family background (migrant workers); and fluctuating student attendance.
Instructional Strategies	Grouping students based on ability level rather than just age; Using peer tutors to assist with listening to the recitation of the Quran; Shifting from lecture-based methods to interactive formats such as games, quizzes, and storytelling; and providing specialized one-on-one tutoring for students with low literacy skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic).

Category	Description of Field Findings
Curriculum Adaptation	Simplifying the curriculum by focusing on daily religious practices (prayer/ablution) rather than rote memorization; Integrating national values (love for the homeland) into religious education; and assessments that emphasize evaluation of daily attitudes and moral conduct rather than merely numerical grades.
Psychospiritual Approach	Setting aside specific time to validate students' emotions and listen to their concerns before starting the lesson; Building a relationship of mutual trust through a non-judgmental, personalized approach.

Based on interviews with the school principal and classroom teachers, the adaptive strategies implemented were a direct response to the actual conditions in heterogeneous classrooms. According to the interviews, curriculum simplification strategies were employed because formal standards were difficult for students with fragmented educational backgrounds to meet immediately.

“We’ve streamlined our Islamic Education curriculum to make it more practical. Our main focus is no longer on memorizing entire chapters, but on helping the children perform their prayers correctly and learn the Arabic alphabet, since many of them come here with no religious literacy.” (From an interview with the director of SB At-Tanzil).

The implementation of the multigrade teaching strategy also serves as a solution to human resource constraints. Classroom teachers explain the task-sharing techniques they use:

“In class, we mix students of different ages. My approach is to present general material on the board for the majority of the class and then provide one-on-one tutoring or special ‘assistance’ to students who are still at a basic literacy level so they don’t fall too far behind.” (Excerpt from an interview with Teacher SB).

The findings of the documentation reveal that the Sanggar Bimbingan in Kuala Lumpur serves as a “lifeline” for the education of children at risk of becoming a “lost generation” due to the lack of official documents. Although physically located in a modest setting such as a shop house, SB plays a strong formal-legal role through its partnership with the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur (SIKL). Challenges on the ground often go beyond academic issues. The center’s director described the psychosocial burdens faced by the students:

“Students often have tantrums or experience fluctuations in their motivation to learn. This is heavily influenced by their home environment; their parents, who work hard as migrant workers, often don’t have time to support them. So, before teaching, we must first be good listeners and validate their feelings, so they feel comfortable at the center.” (Interview Results with the SB Coordinator)

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Guidance Centers (SB) in the Kuala Lumpur area has evolved into an “Adaptive Pedagogy” that is responsive to students’ crises and vulnerabilities. The strategies implemented by educators are not merely technical choices, but rather a form of educational resilience in safeguarding the basic rights of undocumented migrant children. The following strategies were implemented:

Research data indicates a 100% approval rate among teachers regarding the simplification of the Islamic Education curriculum. This phenomenon suggests that, under resource-constrained conditions, education cannot be forced to adhere to rigid national standards. The shift in teaching focus toward functional aspects such as religious practices and Quranic literacy (75%) represents a form of curriculum modification that is relevant to students’ circumstances. This aligns with the view of Agustina & Azizah (2024) that educational services for migrant children must be flexible

to address their literacy deficits. Furthermore, this simplification reflects learning innovations tailored to students' prior knowledge and skills (Surachman & Kusmawati, 2025; Yasin et al., 2025; Tambak, Amril, & Sukenti, 2021).

The challenge posed by disparities in students' ages and abilities (75%) was addressed through multigrade teaching and ability grouping strategies. Although 62.5% of teachers combined students of different ages, they implemented differentiated instruction to ensure every child was supported. This strategy aligns with the findings of Naparan & Alinsug (2021), who state that multigrade classes provide space for students to learn collaboratively at their own pace. Amid the limited facilities of SB, which are often located in shop houses, efficient classroom management is key to instructional success (Hidayat et al., 2023; Tambak et al., 2026; Sukenti & Fauzan, 2024).

A significant finding in this study is the high level of awareness among teachers (87.5%) regarding the importance of emotional validation before teaching. Islamic Education teachers at SB serve a dual role as educators and mental health mentors. Validating students' feelings and providing personal support to those experiencing psychosocial trauma or tantrums reinforces the role of religion as a coping mechanism. Tambak et al. (2025) emphasize that student engagement is highly dependent on professional support from teachers in understanding students' psychological conditions. This approach is also aligned with the concept of responsive pedagogy, which positions a sense of safety as a prerequisite for the successful internalization of religious values (Novra Elvina et al., 2024; Sukenti & Tambak, 2024). The integration of national values into PAI curriculum materials (100%) demonstrates the role of SB as a bastion of national identity. For migrant children, PAI serves as an "anchor of identity" that maintains their emotional connection to their homeland, Indonesia, even while living in a transnational environment. This effort is a crucial strategy to prevent the phenomenon of a "lost generation" that is vulnerable to cultural alienation (Muttaqin et al., 2024). Students' success in obtaining a National Student Identification Number (NISN) through the *Dapodik* system a result of the partnership between SB and SIKL demonstrates systemic support for their academic self-efficacy (Abdullah et al., 2025; Widodo et al., 2025; Tambak et al., 2022).

To reinforce the multi-grade classroom model, teachers at SB implement differentiated instruction strategies to address the diversity of students' learning styles and readiness levels. In this strategy, teachers do not use a one-size-fits-all approach but instead provide different activities, materials, and assessments tailored to each child's profile. This ensures that even though they are in the same classroom, every child's learning needs are optimally met. The implementation of this differentiation is the most dynamic form of instructional adaptation in non-formal education, which has limited resources but demands inclusive learning outcomes (Naparan & Alinsug, 2021).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) for the children of Indonesian migrant workers at the Sanggar Bimbingan (SB) in the Kuala Lumpur area has evolved into an Adaptive Pedagogy that is responsive to crisis conditions. This strategy is realized through five main pillars: (1) curriculum transformation through simplification of materials focused on functional-practical aspects; (2) the application of multigrade teaching to address limitations in human resources and space; (3) the utilization of PAI as a psychospiritual instrument through emotional validation and the building of mutual trust; (4) the integration of religious nationalism to prevent the phenomenon of a "lost generation"; and (5) the use of differentiated instruction to accommodate the diversity of students' learning styles. These findings affirm that, within a constrained transnational context, instructional flexibility and a humanistic approach are key to educational resilience in preserving national identity and the mental health of undocumented students.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Ikbar Robbani was responsible for the research design, data collection through surveys of Community Service Program (KKN) participants, and the preparation of the initial draft of the manuscript. Pipit Mulyah contributed to the data analysis, the theoretical literature review, and provided critical revisions to the substance of the article.

Funding statement

This study did not receive any specific grants from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or nonprofit sectors.

Data availability statement

The primary data supporting the findings of this study are available in the appendix, which includes the results of the survey of student teachers and interview transcripts; these can be accessed by contacting the corresponding author.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest, either financial or personal, that could affect the objectivity of this study.

Declaration of use artificial intelligence

I hereby declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools have been used in the preparation of this research. The use of AI was limited to supporting activities such as language refinement, structuring ideas, and improving clarity of writing. All substantive content, including the research concepts, methodological design, analysis, and conclusions, are the original work and intellectual responsibility of the author. All information generated with the assistance of AI has been carefully reviewed, validated, and revised to ensure accuracy, relevance, and compliance with academic standards. The author remains fully accountable for the integrity and originality of the entire document. This declaration is made truthfully and responsibly for academic purposes.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to express gratitude to the Indonesian School of Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), the administrators of the Sanggar Bimbingan centers in the Kuala Lumpur area, and fellow students participating in the International Community Service Program who assisted with data collection in the field.

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