

Quality, Access, and Competitiveness in Islamic Religious Education: A Critical-Historical Analysis of Policy Implementation at Al-Ikhlash Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evaluation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) policies in Indonesia and their impact on educational quality, access, and institutional competitiveness. A case study of Al-Ikhlash Junior High School in Lumajang was conducted using a critical-historical methodology, combining document analysis of national education policies (1989–2023), field observations, and in-depth interviews with 15 stakeholders. The findings indicate a significant policy shift from domestication to accommodation, marked by the integration of IRE into the national curriculum and the enhancement of the learning environment. Key outcomes include: (1) improved educational quality through the development of contextual curricula and teacher training programs, (2) increased access via inclusive admission policies and infrastructure investments, and (3) enhanced institutional competitiveness, evidenced by student achievements in national religious competitions. Despite these advancements, challenges such as technological disparities and uneven resource distribution remain. Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of policy implementation by highlighting how local actors adapt national mandates. Practically, it offers three strategies for optimizing IRE: (a) digital upskilling for educators, (b) public-private partnerships to strengthen infrastructure, and (c) curriculum moderation that balances religious values with 21st-century skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Indonesia operates within a unique constitutional framework that harmonizes spiritual development with national identity, as enshrined in Article 29 of the 1945

Constitution (Ishak & Manitra, 2022). This balance reflects Indonesia's socio-political ethos, where Pancasila serves as a philosophical bridge between religious values and pluralism (Lumintang, 2021). Historically, IRE policies have transitioned from marginalization in the 1950s (Nasir & Rijal, 2021) to systematic integration into the national education curriculum through Laws No. 2/1989 and No. 20/2003 (Al-Razi et al., 2024). However, this evolution has not been linear, with tensions persisting between state oversight, religious autonomy, and modernization demands (Sulaiman et al., 2023).

Globally, religious education systems grapple with reconciling tradition and modernity (Hefner & Zaman, 2007; Tan, 2014). In Indonesia, where Muslims comprise 86.93% of the population (Cabatay et al., 2024), IRE plays a dual role: fostering spiritual growth and reinforcing social cohesion (Khasanah et al., 2023). Yet, disparities in digital literacy (Kharismatunisa, 2023) and resource allocation (Sari et al., 2022) undermine equitable access to quality education (Farihin et al., 2022). These challenges highlight the need for localized studies to assess policy implementation gaps, particularly in rural institutions like SMP Al-Ikhlash, which serve as microcosms of broader systemic issues (Amaly et al., 2023).

The selection of SMP Al-Ikhlash Lumajang as the subject of this study is driven by several key factors, making it a suitable case for investigating the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) policies. Firstly, Al-Ikhlash has undergone significant transformation in its approach to integrating IRE into the national curriculum. Through observations conducted over six months and interviews with school administrators and educators, it became evident that the school has effectively adapted its educational practices to reflect the evolving national policy, transitioning from a more domesticated approach to one that embraces a character-based and inclusive curriculum. In-depth interviews with faculty members highlighted that the school's proactive stance in incorporating religious values into everyday student life, through both formal teaching and extracurricular activities, has resulted in improved student engagement and performance in religious competitions at regional and national levels.

Furthermore, Al-Ikhlash offers a compelling case study due to its efforts in addressing socio-economic barriers to education. Observational data and interviews with students and teachers revealed the school's commitment to providing access to IRE for students from diverse backgrounds, particularly through its scholarship programs for underprivileged students. This has enabled the institution to broaden its reach and ensure that quality religious education is accessible to a wider demographic. The school's investments in infrastructure, including the integration of digital tools for learning, were also observed to significantly enhance the accessibility and quality of education, particularly for students in rural areas. Through interviews, it was evident that these technological innovations, coupled with ongoing teacher training programs, have been central to overcoming challenges such as digital literacy gaps and resource constraints. As such, SMP Al-Ikhlash represents an exemplary model of how educational institutions in rural settings can adapt to national reforms, bridge access disparities, and simultaneously increase institutional competitiveness.

Theoretical debates on IRE policy analysis remain polarized. Critical pedagogy scholars (Freire, 2018; Lukens-Bull, 2013) emphasize power dynamics in curriculum design, while systems theorists (Senge, 2017) advocate for holistic approaches to institutional competitiveness. This study synthesizes these perspectives by examining the triangular interplay of quality, access, and competitiveness—a framework underexplored in existing literature (Sumiati et al., 2024). By anchoring the analysis in SMP Al-Ikhlash's context, the research captures how macro-level policies are adapted to local realities, addressing a critical gap in policy implementation studies (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Three empirical lacunae motivate this inquiry. First, while macro-level policy analyses on Islamic Religious Education (IRE) are well-represented in the literature (Ball, 2017), few studies delve into how individual schools manage and adapt national mandates amidst significant infrastructural constraints. While existing studies focus broadly on national policy frameworks, there is a gap in research examining how schools with limited resources, such as SMP Al-Ikhlash, navigate these challenges to align with national policies (Ginanjar et al., 2025). Second, while the digital transformation of education, including IRE, has gained some attention in recent years (Masterson, 2020), much of the literature

remains focused on higher education or urban settings. The integration of digital tools in IRE at the junior high school level, particularly in rural schools like SMP Al-Ikhlash, has not been comprehensively studied, even as this transformation becomes increasingly crucial in the post-pandemic educational landscape. Third, much of the existing research emphasizes structural determinism, focusing on how policies shape institutions (Young & Muller, 2014), often overlooking institutional agency—the capacity of schools to innovate within policy frameworks. This study addresses this gap by exploring how SMP Al-Ikhlash demonstrates institutional agency through strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing educational quality (e.g., teacher training programs), expanding access (e.g., inclusive admission policies), and increasing competitiveness (e.g., student participation in national religious competitions).

Methodologically, the research employs a critical-historical lens (Abdurrahman, 2011) to analyze policy documents, interviews, and observational data. This approach aligns with Sugiyono's (2021) qualitative framework, enabling a nuanced examination of how historical policy shifts manifest in contemporary practice. The study's focus on a single institution allows for depth in identifying success factors (e.g., contextual curricula) and persistent barriers (e.g., technological gaps).

This study aims to explore how Islamic Religious Education (IRE) policies are implemented at the institutional level, particularly at SMP Al-Ikhlash, and how these policies affect educational quality, access, and institutional competitiveness. The research investigates the strategies employed by the school to navigate the challenges of policy implementation, focusing on the integration of digital tools, inclusive admission policies, and curriculum adjustments. Theoretically, the study refines the “policy implementation” model (Honig, 2006) by examining how grassroots actors, such as teachers and administrators, reinterpret and adapt top-down directives to fit the local context. Practically, the research provides actionable recommendations for optimizing IRE through three key strategies: (1) targeted digital upskilling for educators to enhance teaching effectiveness, (2) fostering cross-sector partnerships to strengthen school infrastructure, and (3) moderating curricula to balance religious values with essential 21st-century competencies. By centering the perspectives of educators and students, this study offers a replicable framework for Islamic education reform that can be applied in similar Muslim-majority contexts

2. METHODS

This study employs a critical-historical methodology (Abdurrahman, 2011) to examine the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash. Data collection involved three primary methods: policy document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participatory classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and students. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and focused on gathering insights into their experiences with the implementation of IRE policies, challenges faced, and the integration of digital tools in teaching. The interview guide included open-ended questions to explore these aspects in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition to interviews, participatory classroom observations were carried out over a six-month period, from March to August, to observe teaching practices, student engagement, and the incorporation of religious values into daily school activities. These observations focused on both formal lessons and extracurricular activities, such as religious competitions, to understand how IRE was integrated into the broader school culture. The findings from these observations were vital in assessing how IRE policies were operationalized at the grassroots level (Krippendorff, 2018; Kharismatunisa, 2023).

For the policy document analysis, the study reviewed national IRE policy documents, including Laws No. 2/1989 and No. 20/2003, as well as other relevant regulations. These documents were analyzed to identify key themes related to the quality of education, access to IRE, and institutional competitiveness. The analysis aimed to trace the evolution of IRE policies and assess how these policies

were reflected in the local school practices. The document analysis was critical in understanding the broader context of policy implementation at SMP Al-Ikhlash (Krippendorff, 2018; Abdurrahman, 2011).

Regarding the inclusion and exclusion criteria for data selection, only stakeholders who were directly involved in the implementation of IRE policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash were included. This included teachers who had participated in teacher training programs, administrators, and students engaged in the IRE-related curriculum and extracurricular activities. Stakeholders who were not directly involved in the policy implementation, such as those from external institutions, were excluded from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The collected data from interviews and observations were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding with the help of NVivo 12 software. Thematic analysis identified recurring themes related to the challenges and strategies of policy implementation. The policy documents were analyzed using content analysis to assess how the national policies aligned with the local school practices. Triangulation was employed to ensure the validity of the findings by cross-referencing the interview data, observation notes, and policy document analysis. The concept of "curricular negotiation" (Lukens-Bull, 2013) was used to understand how school leaders and educators balanced national curriculum mandates with local contextual needs. Figure 1 below illustrates the research design and the process of combining document analysis, interviews, and observations in the study.

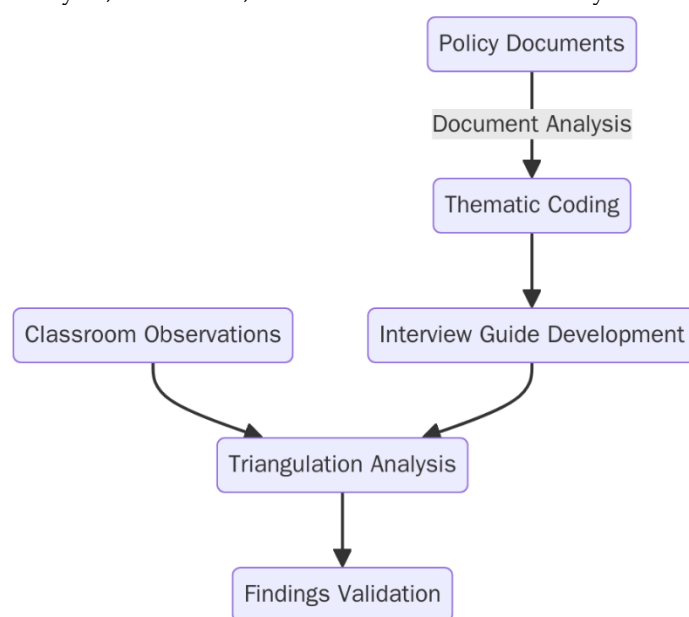


Figure 1. Sequential explanatory design combining document analysis, interviews, and observations (adapted from Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Analytical rigor was ensured through member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where preliminary findings were validated with participants, and peer debriefing (Sugiyono, 2021) with Islamic education experts. The study's focus on a single institution allowed deep examination of contextual factors (e.g., rural infrastructure constraints [Sari et al., 2022]) often overlooked in macro-level studies (Ball, 2017). Limitations include potential subjectivity in qualitative coding, mitigated by maintaining an audit trail (Nata, 2016).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

a. Implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Policy at Al-Ikhlash Junior High School Lumajang through the Lens of History

• Changes in Islamic religious education policy From Domesticative to Accommodative (2006-2023)

Al-Ikhlash Junior High School Lumajang was established on 5 September 2006, at a time when Islamic religious education policy in Indonesia was still focused on the domestication approach—that is, religious education that emphasised more on formal teaching of morals and religion outside the national education curriculum. At its inception, the school endeavoured to maintain diversity in religious instruction, with the aim of deepening spiritual values and rituals. However, along with changes in national policy, Al-Ikhlash Junior High School began to adjust to Law No. 20/2003 which regulates national education.

In 2010, Al-Ikhlash Junior High School began to integrate IRE into the national curriculum. This signalled a policy shift from domesticative to accommodative policy, where Islamic Religious Education was not just an additional subject, but became an integral part of students' character building. This transformation is driven by national policies that prioritise the integration of religious education in more universal and character-based learning.

With the enactment of the policy, a character-based curriculum was introduced at Al-Ikhlash Junior High School, encompassing the teaching of morals, ethics, as well as the integration of religious values in students' daily lives. The policy became more inclusive, accommodating students' diverse backgrounds without compromising the core of religious education itself. The school began to engage better-trained teachers, with an approach that emphasises contextualised teaching that is appropriate to the challenges of the times.

In addition, in 2015, Al-Ikhlash Junior High School adopted a technology-based educational approach in teaching Islamic Religious Education, utilising digital media to increase student participation and provide more interactive learning. It aims to improve the quality of teaching that is not only theoretical but also practical, utilising digital aids to facilitate better learning.

These changes are also inseparable from the continuous training policy for Islamic Education teachers implemented by Al-Ikhlash Junior High School. In 2017, a more intensive teacher training programme was conducted with a focus on developing pedagogical competence and the ability to teach material that is relevant to students' lives. In a short period of time, this training programme proved to improve the quality of teaching, with many teachers successfully integrating learning technology in their classrooms.

As part of the inclusive policy, student enrolment at Al-Ikhlash Junior High School is no longer limited to certain groups, but is opened up more widely by providing scholarships for students from underprivileged families. This policy also includes adjustments to PAI teaching materials to accommodate the diversity of students' socio-economic backgrounds, making religious education more accessible to all levels of society. The following fig.2 illustrates the policy change from domesticative to accommodative in Al-Ikhlash Junior High School Lumajang:

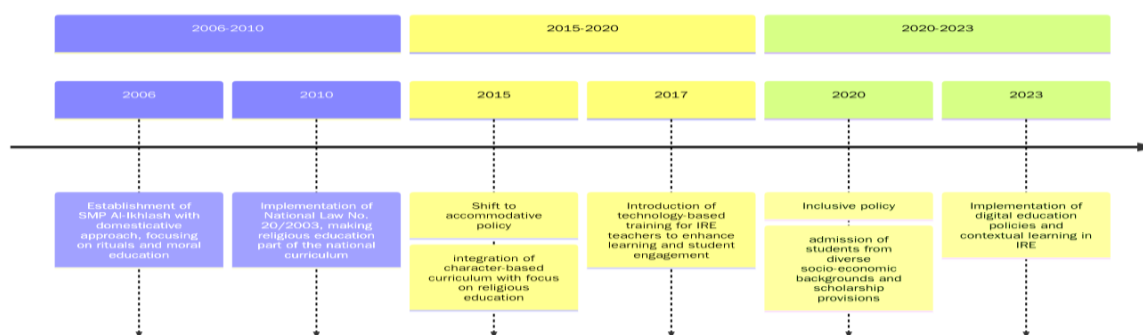


Figure 2. the transition of IRE policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash

The Figure above provides a clear timeline of the significant shifts in the IRE policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash, outlining key milestones from its inception in 2006 to the current comprehensive accommodative approach. Each milestone highlights how the school has adapted to both national policy and local community needs, evolving from a marginal educational approach to one that actively incorporates modern educational tools and inclusive policies. The policy shift reflects a broader transformation in Islamic education in Indonesia, moving towards a more integrative and adaptive model.

In conclusion, the transition of IRE policies from a domestically focused approach to an accommodative one at SMP Al-Ikhlash exemplifies how the school has kept pace with national educational reforms while addressing the specific needs of its diverse student population. By integrating both traditional religious values and modern pedagogical strategies, the school has created a dynamic learning environment that prepares students for both spiritual and social challenges.

The shift from a domesticated to an accommodative policy at SMP Al-Ikhlash not only aligned with national educational reforms but also led to significant improvements in key areas. Observations of classroom activities in 2017 revealed that the introduction of technology-based teaching tools in IRE significantly enhanced student participation and engagement. Teachers, empowered by continuous professional development programs, were observed using digital media to make religious lessons more interactive, which in turn improved students' understanding of complex religious concepts. This shift directly contributed to the quality of education, with both teachers and students benefiting from a more dynamic and contextualized approach to teaching and learning.

Furthermore, the inclusive policy implemented by SMP Al-Ikhlash, which provided scholarships for students from underprivileged backgrounds, dramatically improved access to Islamic Religious Education. Interviews with school administrators highlighted that these scholarships allowed students from various socio-economic backgrounds to attend, breaking down financial barriers that had previously limited access to religious education. The inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds also led to a more enriching educational experience, fostering a multicultural environment where students learned not only religious knowledge but also important social skills.

Additionally, the emphasis on extracurricular activities, such as participation in national religious competitions like Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ), bolstered the competitiveness of SMP Al-Ikhlash. Teachers reported that students' success in these competitions helped elevate the school's reputation, attracting more prospective students. This focus on competitiveness, supported by an integrated curriculum that balances traditional religious values with modern competencies, ensured that students were well-prepared to face both spiritual and social challenges in their future endeavors.

- Implementation of Islamic Religious Education Policy: Inclusivity and Integration of Religious Values in Daily Life**

One important aspect of the changing Islamic education policy at Al-Ikhlash Junior High School is the implementation of inclusive education, which allows students from diverse socio-economic

backgrounds to have equal opportunities in accessing Islamic religious education. This policy plays a role in expanding the accessibility of a more inclusive religious education and facilitating students to develop their moral values and character through teaching that prioritizes religion and society. Data from interviews with administrators and teachers indicated that the introduction of scholarships for underprivileged students significantly expanded access to education, particularly for those who previously lacked financial resources to attend. The inclusive policy has helped to break down socio-economic barriers, providing students with the opportunity to engage in quality Islamic education regardless of their background.

The integration of religious values in students' daily lives has been introduced in the learning process since 2017. SMP Al-Ikhlash emphasizes the importance of applying Islamic values in various aspects of life, not only in the classroom but also through extracurricular activities and other social activities. Students are encouraged to relate the religious knowledge they acquire to daily practices, such as social behavior, life at home, as well as its influence on society. This approach has been observed to enhance the quality of student engagement, as evidenced by their increased participation in extracurricular activities like Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ) and religious speech competitions. Teachers reported that these activities not only strengthened students' religious knowledge but also fostered critical thinking and leadership skills, which are integral to character development.

For example, in extracurricular activities such as Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ) and religious speech competitions, students are invited to go deeper into religious texts and apply them in real life. This aims to develop students' characters, especially in terms of role modelling and leadership, which are also the main objectives of the implemented PAI policy. Observational data showed that these extracurricular competitions helped improve the school's competitiveness, with students performing well in regional and national events, thereby raising the school's profile. The focus on these activities has reinforced the school's reputation as a competitive institution in the field of Islamic education, attracting both prospective students and their families.

The application of religious values in students' lives is not only limited to teaching at school but is also encouraged through family participation. Parents are invited to be involved in students' character building at home. Through cooperation between school and family, Al-Ikhlash Junior High School endeavours to create an environment that supports students' spiritual and social development outside of academic activities. Interviews with parents revealed that this collaborative approach has positively impacted students' behavior and character development, showing the effective role of family-school partnerships in shaping well-rounded individuals.

In addition, Al-Ikhlash Junior High School adopts an approach that prioritizes a balance between the spiritual and social aspects of students. Activities such as group discussions, case studies, and simulations of moral values are conducted to strengthen social relationships among students and encourage them to think critically about the application of religious values in complex social situations. This method of integrating religious values into learning has been observed to foster a deeper understanding among students, moving beyond mere memorization to encourage application and critical thinking. The school's commitment to practical learning strategies directly aligns with its focus on preparing students for both spiritual growth and social adaptability in rapidly changing environments.

This process is also in line with the contextual approach taken by Al-Ikhlash Junior High School, which teaches religion by linking the material taught to real social problems. In this regard, Al-Ikhlash Junior High School has succeeded in creating a sustainable and relevant religious education, which prepares students to become individuals who are not only religiously knowledgeable but also able to adapt to rapid social changes. Through interviews with teachers and students, it became evident that the school's contextual teaching approach has significantly enhanced students' ability to apply religious values to real-life situations, thereby improving their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The following Figure 3 illustrates the process of integrating religious values in the daily lives of students at Al-Ikhlash Junior High School:

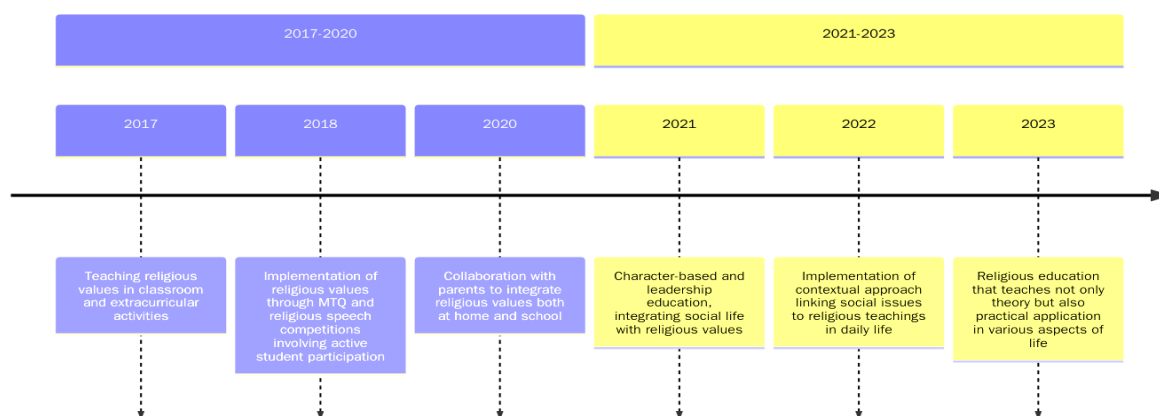


Figure 3. the process of integrating religious values

The table above outlines the progression of how SMP Al-Ikhlash integrated religious values into students' daily lives, through both formal classroom education and informal extracurricular activities. It emphasizes the school's commitment to a holistic education model, where students are not only taught religious knowledge but are also encouraged to practice and live by those values in everyday settings. The involvement of parents in this process underscores the collaborative nature of the school's educational philosophy, which aims to nurture well-rounded individuals.

In conclusion, the integration of religious values into daily life at SMP Al-Ikhlash represents a comprehensive approach to Islamic education. This approach prepares students not only to excel academically but also to become ethical, socially responsible individuals who can apply their religious knowledge meaningfully in their personal and professional lives. Through ongoing investments in teacher training and inclusive education policies, the school has successfully increased both the quality and accessibility of religious education, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds have the tools to compete and thrive in the wider community.

b. Impact of the Implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Policies on Access and Institutional Competitiveness

• Impact on Access to Islamic Religious Education (IRE)

The implementation of IRE policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash Lumajang has had a significant impact on access to Islamic Religious Education, particularly by addressing the socio-economic barriers that previously limited students' opportunities to receive quality religious education. Initially, access to IRE was restricted, and only students from financially privileged backgrounds could enroll in private religious institutions. However, with the implementation of inclusive admission policies in 2015, SMP Al-Ikhlash began offering scholarships to underprivileged students, ensuring that education is accessible to a broader demographic.

The introduction of these inclusive admission policies has not only expanded access to IRE but has also helped SMP Al-Ikhlash attract a more diverse student body. This inclusivity has resulted in a more equitable educational environment, where students from various socio-economic backgrounds can receive equal opportunities to access quality education. According to interviews with school administrators, the implementation of these policies has helped bridge the socio-economic gap, enabling students who may have otherwise been excluded to benefit from high-quality religious education.

Furthermore, the school has invested significantly in physical infrastructure and learning resources, which has further enhanced access to IRE. These improvements include better classroom facilities, more extensive library resources, and the integration of digital learning tools, which have made religious education more engaging and accessible to students. This comprehensive approach has

contributed to reducing educational disparities among students and has increased the institution's reach to students in rural or disadvantaged communities.

Another key factor that has contributed to improving access to IRE is the teacher training programs. These programs, which began in 2017, have focused on equipping teachers with modern teaching techniques and digital literacy, enabling them to deliver IRE effectively to a more diverse student population. This approach has allowed the school to cater to students with varying levels of prior knowledge and abilities, ensuring that all students receive a quality education.

The table below illustrates the significant changes and improvements in access to IRE at SMP Al-Ikhlash:

Tabel 1. the significant changes and improvements in access to IRE

Year	Impact on Access to IRE
2015	Implementation of inclusive admission policies, allowing students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to enroll.
2017	Introduction of scholarships for underprivileged students to ensure equal opportunities for access to IRE.
2019	Investment in physical infrastructure, including better classrooms, libraries, and learning resources for students.
2020	Teacher training programs to improve pedagogical and digital literacy, ensuring more effective teaching of IRE.
2022	Expansion of digital learning tools for broader access to religious education, especially for remote or underserved areas.
2023	Continuous efforts to bridge the socio-economic gap and enhance accessibility through innovative teaching and scholarships.

The table above highlights the key milestones in improving access to IRE at SMP Al-Ikhlash, with a focus on inclusive admission policies, teacher training, and infrastructure improvements. The implementation of these policies has broadened the school's reach, enabling students from various socio-economic backgrounds to benefit from quality Islamic Religious Education. The inclusion of scholarships and investment in digital tools has made religious education more accessible, ensuring that no student is left behind due to financial constraints or lack of resources.

In conclusion, the implementation of inclusive policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash has dramatically improved accessibility to Islamic Religious Education, promoting educational equity and ensuring that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, can access high-quality religious education. The school's commitment to inclusivity and educational equity has played a crucial role in expanding its reach and fostering an environment where diverse student populations can thrive.

• Impact on Institutional Competitiveness

The implementation of IRE policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash has also had a significant impact on the school's institutional competitiveness, elevating it as a leader in Islamic education within the region. The school's success in various religious competitions, such as Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ) and religious speech contests, has enhanced its reputation and established it as a competitive institution in the educational landscape.

The school's competitive edge lies in its unique ability to combine rigorous academic training with strong character-building initiatives. According to interviews with faculty members and administrators, the inclusion of religious activities, such as Quranic recitation and public speaking contests, has contributed to the school's high performance in regional and national competitions. These achievements have not only increased the school's visibility but also attracted more students seeking a well-rounded education that balances both academic excellence and spiritual growth.

Additionally, the adoption of modern teaching practices and the integration of technology in religious education have made SMP Al-Ikhlash more appealing to prospective students and parents. The school’s commitment to adopting innovative teaching tools, such as digital learning platforms and interactive religious education materials, has given it a distinct advantage over other institutions. This technological adoption has allowed the school to enhance the quality of its religious education, making it both academically rigorous and engaging.

Moreover, SMP Al-Ikhlash has continued to adapt to changing educational trends, including the incorporation of 21st-century skills into its religious education curriculum. This focus on critical thinking, problem-solving, and digital literacy ensures that students are not only knowledgeable about their religion but also equipped with the skills necessary to succeed in the modern world. As a result, the school has become a preferred choice for parents seeking an institution that can provide holistic education that balances both spiritual and academic needs.

The increasing competitiveness of the institution is also evident in its strong student performance in national religious competitions, which further solidifies its position as a leader in the field of Islamic education. SMP Al-Ikhlash’s success in these areas underscores the effectiveness of its educational policies and reinforces its reputation as a school that produces high-achieving, well-rounded students.

The table below illustrates the factors that have contributed to SMP Al-Ikhlash’s enhanced competitiveness:

Table 2. the factors that have contributed to SMP Al-Ikhlash’s enhanced competitiveness	
Year	Impact on Institutional Competitiveness
2017	Introduction of religious competitions (e.g., MTQ, religious speech contests), boosting student performance and visibility.
2018	Adoption of innovative teaching tools and digital learning platforms, enhancing the quality and appeal of IRE.
2020	Integration of 21st-century skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving) into the IRE curriculum, improving academic performance.
2021	Continued success in regional and national competitions, elevating the school’s reputation as a leader in Islamic education.
2022	Expansion of extracurricular programs to include leadership development and community engagement activities.
2023	SMP Al-Ikhlash recognized as a competitive institution in the region due to its holistic approach to education and religious leadership.

The table above presents key milestones in SMP Al-Ikhlash’s journey toward enhancing its institutional competitiveness. Through its focus on religious competitions, innovative teaching tools, and the integration of 21st-century skills, the school has significantly improved its standing in the educational landscape. The emphasis on holistic education, which combines academic excellence with religious and character development, has strengthened the school’s reputation and made it a preferred choice for parents and students.

In conclusion, the implementation of IRE policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash has bolstered its competitiveness by improving student performance in national competitions, adopting modern teaching methods, and integrating essential life skills into the curriculum. The school’s commitment to providing a well-rounded education has enhanced its prestige, positioning it as a leading institution in Islamic education and a model for other schools in the region.

Discussion: Impact of the Implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Policies on Access and Institutional Competitiveness

The findings of this study suggest significant shifts in the way SMP Al-Ikhlash has implemented Islamic Religious Education (IRE) policies. These shifts reflect the school's ongoing adaptation to national policy reforms and the local actors' interpretations of these policies. However, while the findings provide a comprehensive description of what has occurred, it is essential to delve deeper into why and how these changes took place and to examine their broader implications.

- **Actors' Interpretation of Policy: Local Agency and Policy Implementation**

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash has been significantly influenced by the local agency of teachers and school leadership, aligning with Honig's (2006) theory on policy implementation. As Honig (2006) argues, local actors play a crucial role in interpreting and adapting national policies to fit local contexts. In the case of SMP Al-Ikhlash, the shift from a domesticated to an accommodative IRE policy was not merely a passive adoption of national directives but was actively shaped by local decisions, particularly in the interpretation and integration of technology, infrastructure development, and inclusive education policies.

For example, the school's adoption of digital tools for teaching IRE, which began in 2015, was not a mandated move from the national level but a response by local actors (teachers and administrators) to improve engagement and adapt to technological advancements in education. Teachers, after undergoing professional development in 2017, successfully integrated digital platforms into the curriculum, demonstrating local interpretation of national policy. According to Honig (2006), this adaptation highlights how local actors do not merely implement policies but reinterpret them based on their knowledge and the realities they face. This localized implementation enabled a more engaging learning environment, ultimately enhancing the quality of education at SMP Al-Ikhlash.

Moreover, the school's inclusive admission policies, including scholarships for students from lower-income families, further demonstrate local agency in interpreting broader national policies aimed at equity in education. Interviews with school administrators revealed that while the national policy emphasized inclusive education, it was the school leadership that determined how best to implement these policies in the context of their community, ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds had access to quality IRE.

- **Comparing Findings with Other Studies**

When compared to other studies in the field, such as Kharismatunisa (2023) and Lukens-Bull (2013), the findings at SMP Al-Ikhlash reflect both similarities and differences in the implementation of Islamic Religious Education. Kharismatunisa (2023) discusses the role of digital tools in enhancing the quality of religious education in rural areas, which aligns with the findings at Al-Ikhlash, where digital media has been incorporated to improve student engagement. However, SMP Al-Ikhlash stands out in its holistic integration of religious values with digital tools, not just as a means of enhancing academic learning but also for moral education. This integration differs from Kharismatunisa's findings, where technology was primarily focused on enhancing academic subjects.

Additionally, Lukens-Bull (2013) explores the concept of curricular negotiation in schools, where educators balance national mandates with local needs. At SMP Al-Ikhlash, this concept is visible in how the school adapts its IRE curriculum, integrating religious teachings with leadership and character-building activities. This local negotiation allows the school to maintain its religious values while also equipping students with the skills necessary for modern challenges, which mirrors Lukens-Bull's notion of curricular negotiation—where teachers and school leadership adapt national curriculum requirements to the local context.

Furthermore, the success of SMP Al-Ikhlash in religious competitions like Musabaqah Tilawatil Quran (MTQ) provides a practical example of how educational institutions use extracurricular activities

to enhance competitiveness. This mirrors findings in other studies, such as Rahmadi et al. (2019), which highlight the importance of religious competitions in raising the profile of educational institutions.

- **Synthesizing Quality, Access, and Competitiveness**

The findings at SMP Al-Ikhlash demonstrate a clear connection between quality, access, and competitiveness, where each pillar mutually reinforces the others. Quality of education at SMP Al-Ikhlash has been significantly enhanced through continuous teacher training, the adoption of digital learning platforms, and the integration of modern pedagogical techniques. This shift has not only improved student engagement but also ensured that religious education is delivered in a manner that resonates with the challenges of the contemporary world, combining traditional religious values with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and digital literacy.

The increased access to IRE, particularly for students from lower-income families, aligns directly with the quality of education provided. Through the introduction of scholarships and infrastructure improvements, the school has made religious education more accessible to a wider range of students, fulfilling both national goals of equity in education and local community needs. The combination of digital tools and inclusive policies has ensured that students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds benefit from high-quality IRE, which aligns with global educational reforms emphasizing inclusivity and accessibility (Rahmadi et al., 2019; Zarkasyi, 2017).

Finally, the success of SMP Al-Ikhlash in religious competitions and its ability to integrate modern skills into the IRE curriculum has enhanced its institutional competitiveness. By fostering leadership, character development, and academic excellence, the school has positioned itself as a leading institution in Islamic education, attracting students from diverse backgrounds. The competitiveness of the school is further strengthened by its adoption of modern pedagogical strategies, ensuring that students are not only religiously knowledgeable but also equipped with the skills necessary to thrive in both religious and secular environments. This combination of quality, access, and competitiveness showcases how SMP Al-Ikhlash is building a holistic education model that prepares students to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

In conclusion, the implementation of IRE policies at SMP Al-Ikhlash Lumajang has significantly enhanced both accessibility to quality Islamic education and the school's institutional competitiveness. The inclusive policies, investments in infrastructure, and teacher training programs have created a more equitable and accessible educational environment for students from diverse backgrounds. At the same time, the school's success in religious competitions, integration of 21st-century skills, and focus on character development have positioned it as a leader in Islamic education in the region. SMP Al-Ikhlash's approach serves as a model for other Islamic schools seeking to enhance both their accessibility and competitiveness in a globalized educational landscape.

4. CONCLUSION

The study found that SMP Al-Ikhlash's implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) policies has significantly improved quality, access, and competitiveness. The quality of education has been enhanced through teacher training and the integration of digital tools, which foster a more engaging and effective learning environment. Access to IRE has been broadened with inclusive admission policies and infrastructure improvements, making education more equitable for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, the school's focus on extracurricular activities and modern skills development has strengthened its competitiveness, positioning it as a leading institution in the region.

This article contributes to the field by highlighting how local actors (teachers, school leaders) actively interpret and adapt national education policies, as demonstrated in the shift from domesticated to accommodative IRE policies. It also offers practical insights for Islamic schools seeking to balance quality education with inclusivity and competitiveness in a rapidly evolving educational landscape. For future research, it is recommended to further explore the long-term impacts of digital integration

on student outcomes and the scalability of inclusive policies in other Islamic schools across the region. Additionally, investigating how schools can integrate 21st-century skills with religious education in a variety of socio-economic contexts would provide valuable insights for policy and practice.

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