



## BALANCING THE RIGHT TO PLAY AND RELIGIOUS VALUES IN FAITH-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: IDEAL VS. REALITY

Devita Savitri<sup>1\*</sup>, Sahrona Harahap<sup>2</sup>, Mildayani Suhana<sup>3</sup>,  
Laila Robiatul A.<sup>4</sup>, Iska Iklimah H.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>Pendidikan Islam Anak Usia Dini, Universitas Islam KH. Ruhiat Cipasung, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author: [devita@unikcipasung.ac.id](mailto:devita@unikcipasung.ac.id)

**Abstract:** This study aims to examine the gap between the ideal concept of children's right to play and the practical implementation of religious values in faith-based early childhood education institutions. Using the theoretical lens of child rights-based education and developmental learning theory, this research investigates how Islamic early childhood institutions accommodate children's right to play amidst structured religious instruction. The research employs a qualitative case study approach conducted in two Islamic early childhood education centers in Indonesia. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and principals, and document analysis of curriculum schedules and daily activity plans. The instruments used included structured observation checklists and semi-structured interview guides. Data were analyzed thematically using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Findings indicate that although educators understand the developmental importance of play, institutional priorities often place greater emphasis on religious routines and cognitive achievement, leaving limited room for child-initiated or imaginative play. Nonetheless, the study identified emerging practices where religious teachings are embedded into play-based activities, suggesting the potential for curriculum models that integrate both spiritual and developmental goals. This research concludes that a balanced approach is needed to ensure that faith-based institutions uphold children's right to play while preserving their religious values. The study contributes to policy discussions and curriculum innovation in early childhood education settings, particularly those with religious orientations.

**Keywords:** child rights, faith-based education, play-based learning.

### INTRODUCTION

Play is a fundamental right of every child, enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which guarantees a child's right to rest, leisure, and play appropriate to their developmental stage. In the Indonesian context, this right is reaffirmed in Law No. 23 of 2002 on Child Protection and in the Ministry of Education and Culture Regulation No. 137 of 2014 concerning National Standards for Early Childhood Education. Play is not just a recreational activity it supports holistic

development, fostering cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual growth (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2018; Lalani, 2020; Fitriana et al., 2024; Savitri, 2025).

Despite this, many faith-based early childhood education institutions often focus heavily on religious instruction, structured routines, and academic achievements. In such environments, opportunities for child-initiated, imaginative, and exploratory play may be limited (Nasir et al., 2020; Ruppell, 2004; Savitri & Zaman, 2021b; Verina et al., 2024). Teachers may prioritize religious discipline, leading to a reduction in time and space for play-based learning, which is vital for early development (Amin, 2024; Hackworth, 2012; Hodge, 2022; Johnston, 2003; Monsma & Carlson-Thies, 2015; Vryhof, 2004).

Research by Ahnan'Azzam & Leany, (2024) highlights a common perception among educators in Islamic PAUDs that play is supplementary rather than central. This perspective may conflict with child-centered pedagogies that view play as a primary learning strategy (Russo, 2015; Burtonwood, 2002; Clayton et al., 2018; Parker-Jenkins et al., 2019; Wareham, 2022). Furthermore, although character education is deeply rooted in Islamic teaching, its application in classroom settings often overlooks child agency and autonomy (Adawiah et al., 2023; Harahap et al., 2023, 2025; Harahap & Savitri, 2022).

Previous studies on curriculum development in Islamic early childhood education have addressed religious integration (Papakostas, 2024; Savitri, 2025; Savitri & Zaman, 2021a), but few have directly examined the intersection of religious values and child rights, particularly the right to play. This study seeks to fill that gap by investigating how these institutions interpret, negotiate, and implement children's right to play amid religious priorities.

Based on this background, the research questions are as follows:

1. How is the right to play conceptualized and implemented in faith-based early childhood institutions?
2. What factors support or hinder the fulfillment of children's right to play in these settings?
3. How can religious values be integrated into child-centered, play-based learning models?

This study aims to explore the dissonance between the ideal rights framework and actual practices in Islamic PAUDs, while also identifying integrative strategies that uphold both developmental and spiritual goals.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study research design (Yin, 2009). This approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of children's right to play within faith-based early childhood education institutions. The research was conducted in two Islamic PAUD institutions located in urban and semi-urban areas of Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling based on their religious orientation and curriculum characteristics (Creswell, 2017). Data collection techniques included direct classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers and school principals, and analysis of institutional documents such as daily schedules, lesson plans (RPPH), and curriculum guidelines. Structured observation checklists and semi-structured interview protocols were used as instruments, developed based on indicators derived from child development theories (Kallio et al., 2016) and national PAUD standards (Kemendikbud, 2016).

Data were analyzed thematically using Miles & Huberman, (1994) interactive model, which involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. To ensure data validity, the study employed triangulation of sources and techniques (Patton, 2014), member checking, and reflective field notes. Ethical procedures such as obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, and using the data solely for academic purposes were adhered to in accordance with research ethics standards (Biklen & Casella, 2007).

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the findings of the study and provides a critical analysis and synthesis based on observations, interviews, and document analysis conducted in two Islamic PAUD institutions.

### **1. Limited Allocation for Play**

Observational data indicated that play was marginally integrated into the daily curriculum, typically placed after formal lessons or religious instruction. Teachers reported that play activities were used to reward good behavior or task completion. This

practice reveals a compliance-driven pedagogy rather than a developmental one. According to Meyers & Berk, (2014), play should be at the core of early learning environments to stimulate cognitive, emotional, and social development. However, in both institutions studied, less than 10% of the total daily schedule was dedicated to play, echoing (Hasanah & Andini, 2024) findings on restricted play opportunities in religious settings.

2. Dominance of Religious Routine

The institutional culture in both PAUDs heavily emphasized rituals such as prayer times, Quran memorization, and moral lectures. While these activities foster spiritual values, they restrict time for spontaneous, exploratory learning. Interviews with educators highlighted the pressure to meet parental expectations of 'religious rigor,' which often translates into tightly scheduled, teacher-led instruction. This aligns with Bartkowski et al., (2009) critique that faith-based curricula can sometimes undermine constructivist, child-centered learning models if not carefully balanced.

3. Emerging Integrative Practices

Despite structural limitations, several teachers demonstrated creative strategies for integrating Islamic values with play-based learning. For example, storytelling of prophets' lives through puppet shows, Islamic board games to reinforce Arabic letters, and role-playing of prayer activities. These practices align with Ruppell, (2004) suggestion that Islamic early education can be both faith-driven and developmentally appropriate. The key lies in teacher agency and curriculum flexibility.

Table 1 summarizes the average time allocation for play activities observed across both institutions.

**Table 1.** Time Allocation for Play Activities in Two Islamic PAUD Institutions

| Institution | Average Play Time (minutes) | Total Daily Schedule (minutes) |
|-------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| PAUD A      | 20                          | 300                            |
| PAUD B      | 15                          | 285                            |

As indicated in Table 1, playtime accounted for only 5%–7% of the entire school day. This is concerning, considering that national early childhood education standards (Kemendikbud, 2016) advocate for at least 30% of learning time to be dedicated to play-

based activities. Such discrepancies point to an urgent need for curricular reform in faith-based institutions.

A critical synthesis reveals that while institutional religious goals are valid, they must be recontextualized to support child development. (Patton, 2014) emphasizes that educational quality in early childhood is strongly linked to responsive, engaging learning environments. If religious instruction becomes too rigid, it risks alienating children's natural curiosity and need for play. This study suggests that an integrative curriculum model, supported by teacher training and community involvement, is essential to ensure both developmental and spiritual goals are met.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that while faith-based early childhood institutions recognize the importance of play, its practical implementation remains limited due to the dominance of structured religious routines and institutional expectations. The findings reveal a significant gap between the normative concept of children's right to play and the actual classroom practices in Islamic PAUD settings.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the growing discourse on reconciling rights-based education with faith-oriented pedagogy. It affirms the need to rethink curriculum frameworks that can harmonize spiritual instruction with developmentally appropriate practices. Pedagogically, the study highlights the role of teacher agency and innovation in integrating play within religious contexts, suggesting that faith and play are not mutually exclusive but can be blended to enrich learning.

The implications of this research are particularly relevant for curriculum developers, school administrators, and policymakers in Islamic early childhood education. Training programs should be designed to equip educators with strategies to integrate Islamic values into play-based models. Institutions are also encouraged to review their daily schedules to ensure that play is not marginalized.

One limitation of this study is its focus on only two PAUD institutions, which may not fully represent the diversity of Islamic early education practices across Indonesia. Future research should involve broader sampling and consider comparative studies with secular

or non-religious PAUDs to examine how different ideological foundations influence children's learning environments...

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to express their deepest gratitude to the headmasters, teachers, and staff of the two Islamic early childhood education institutions who kindly participated and supported this research. We are also thankful to the parents and children involved in the observation activities for their openness and cooperation throughout the data collection process.

Special thanks are extended to our colleagues at the Early Childhood Islamic Education Study Program, Faculty of Tarbiyah, KH. Ruhiat Cipasung Islamic University, for their continuous support and encouragement during this study. Lastly, we acknowledge the contribution of reviewers and academic mentors who provided insightful feedback that significantly enhanced the quality of this paper.

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