



Six Practices of Symbolic Communication in Islamic Education for Children with Special Needs

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Article Information:

Received June 23, 2025

Revised July 25, 2025

Accepted August 28, 2025

Keywords: *Symbolic communication practices, Islamic education, children with special needs*

Abstract

Symbolic communication practices for children with special needs in Islamic religious education include the use of body movements and so on. This study aims to analyze how symbolic communication practices are used in Islamic religious education for children with special needs. This study uses a qualitative method with a case study type. The informants consisted of eight people, including Islamic education teachers, students with special needs, parents, and school principals. All interview data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman technique, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and interactive conclusion drawing or verification. The findings of this study show six symbolic communication practices in Islamic religious education for children with special needs. The six practices are the use of visual media, worship aids, concrete movements, role modeling, continuous habituation, and emotional touch. The implications or benefits of these findings are that they make it easier for students to understand the lessons, are more effective and efficient, and help students achieve independence in learning, as seen in their increased understanding of symbols, consistency in performing worship, and positive responses.

INTRODUCTION

Religious education plays a fundamental role in shaping the character and spirituality of students, including children with special needs (Salisah et al., 2024; Yuliza & Taqiyuddin, 2024). However, the process of instilling religious values in children with special needs in special schools faces complex challenges. Children with special needs have diverse characteristics, such as communication barriers, cognitive impairments, or physical limitations, which can hinder their understanding and practice of conventional worship (Andriani & others, 2025; Khairun Nisa et al., 2018; Zacky Al-Ghofir El-Muhtadi Rizal et al., 2025). Therefore, a flexible and adaptive learning approach is essential so that children with special needs can understand and practice worship according to their abilities. One approach that can be applied is symbolic communication, which emphasizes

How to cite:

Ritonga, I., Lahmuddin, L., Zainun, Z. (2025). Six Practices of Symbolic Communication in Islamic Education for Children with Special Needs. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary of Higher Education (IJMURHICA)*, 8(4), 716-727.

E-ISSN:

2622-741x

Published by:

Islamic Studies and Development Center Universitas Negeri Padang

the use of symbols, gestures, facial, expressions, body language, as well as visual media and technology to convey messages effectively. The theory of symbolic interactionism proposed by Mead explains that individuals understand meaning through social interaction and the use of symbols. In the context of religious education for children with special needs, teachers act as facilitators who create symbols that can be interpreted by children so that they can better understand the procedures of worship (Arif Muadz, 2021; Nurhaliza Putri Sabila & Siti Quratul Ain, 2023; Rahmawati & Suryadi, 2019; Setiawan, 2019).

At the Medan Special Education School, various symbolic communication-based methods have been applied in teaching worship. Teachers use visual media such as pictures, videos, and interactive applications to help children understand the movements of prayer and ablution. In addition, nonverbal communication approaches such as eye contact, gentle touch, and facial expressions are also used to reinforce children's understanding of religious values (Haris Budiman, 2016; Rizqy Ana, 2020). However, the effectiveness of this method still requires further study, especially in adjusting the approach to the specific needs of each child (Santrock, 2012). Another challenge in implementing symbolic communication in religious education is the limited resources and training available to educators. Not all teachers have sufficient understanding of symbolic communication techniques that are appropriate for children with special needs. In addition, parental involvement is also a crucial factor in the success of religious education at home, as children need consistent experiences at school and in the family environment.

Research on symbolic communication in religious education for children with special needs is still limited, especially in the context of Special Education Schools in Medan City (Faihanah & Muniroh, 2022; Hanum, 2017; Malik et al., 2023). Based on this background, this study will examine how symbolic communication is applied by teachers in teaching religion to children with special needs in Special Education Schools in Medan City. This study will focus on the methods used, the challenges faced, and the impact on the understanding and practice of worship by children with special needs. Religious education for children with special needs is a very important aspect in shaping their character, morals, and spiritual values. In Islam, worship is not only an obligation, but also a means of shaping character and closeness to Allah. However, for children with special needs, understanding and practicing worship often faces more complex obstacles than children in general. Sensory, motor, cognitive, and communication limitations pose unique challenges in the process of internalizing religious values.

The Medan Islamic Education Park Special School focuses primarily on religious education for children with special needs in its Islamic education curriculum. However, in reality, conventional approaches based on verbal and textual methods are often ineffective in conveying the concept of worship to children with special needs. This causes a gap between *Das Sollen* (what should be done) and *Das Sein* (what happens in practice). Therefore, a more inclusive communication method is needed so that religious values can be understood and practiced optimally by children with special needs (Eka Dheasari et al., 2024; Nurus Sofia & Rasyidah, 2021).

The symbolic communication approach, as described in Mead's (2020) symbolic interactionism theory, emphasizes the use of symbols, gestures, body language, facial expressions, and visual media to construct meaning in social interactions. At the Taman Pendidikan Islam Special School, this method is applied through Islamic sign language for deaf children, picture

communication boards for children with intellectual disabilities, and worship movement simulations for children with motor disorders (Restendy, 2019). This approach aims to help children with special needs understand worship practices such as prayer, ablution, supplication, and short verses in a concrete manner. However, limited resources, lack of teacher training, and minimal visual learning media often hinder its effectiveness (Afifah & Kusmiati, n.d.; Futaqi & Yenuri, 2023).

Previous studies have focused more on general strategies for teaching religion to children with special needs or examining communication therapy in special education. Meanwhile, this study specifically examines the application of symbolic communication in teaching worship at Islamic Special Schools. Thus, this study provides novelty in the field of religious education by emphasizing the actual practices of teachers, the obstacles they face, and their influence on the understanding and implementation of worship by children with special needs.

In addition, the Islamic education curriculum in Special Schools needs to be adjusted to be more inclusive by considering the specific needs of each type of disability. For example, children with autism spectrum disorder can be taught through routines and repetition, while children with intellectual disabilities learn more effectively through role-playing and storytelling (Afiah, 2021). The role of parents is also very important, but many find it difficult to guide their children due to a lack of understanding of effective communication techniques. Support in the form of training for parents and teachers is a key factor in the successful implementation of symbolic communication in religious education.

Thus, this study is academically useful for enriching research on symbolic communication in the field of Islamic religious education for children with special needs. The results of this study are also useful as a reference for teachers and parents in determining and implementing appropriate strategies for instilling religious values in children with special needs (Aryanti et al., 2022; Uldiman et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the implications of this study are the need for an adaptive Islamic religious curriculum and the strengthening of collaboration between schools and families so that the internalization of religious values in children with special needs can be achieved to the maximum extent possible (Istiqamah et al., 2024; Mustafa et al., 2025).

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods and case studies, focusing on an in-depth understanding of teachers' symbolic communication in instilling religious values in children with special needs at the Taman Pendidikan Islam Special School in Medan (Akem et al., 2025; Engkizar, Jaafar, Masuwd, et al., 2025; Ikhlās et al., 2025; Rahman et al., 2025). The location was chosen purposively because this school has students with various special needs and applies a symbolic communication approach in Islamic religious education. The data sources consisted of primary data obtained from interviews with 11 informants, namely: the principal, school administrator, 3 teachers, 3 parents, and 3 students with special needs. The informants were also selected using a purposive technique, which was adjusted to the relevance of the research focus. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from literature, books, journals, articles, and other relevant documents. The data collection techniques used included non-participant observation to observe the learning process and teacher interactions with children with special needs, unstructured in-depth interviews to explore in-depth information from

informants regarding their experiences, strategies, or challenges faced, and documentation to collect written and visual evidence related to learning activities (Engkizar, Muslim, et al., 2025; Faddhia et al., 2025; Guspita et al., 2025; Khairunisa et al., 2025).

Data analysis was conducted following the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and interactive and continuous conclusion drawing/verification from the beginning of data collection to the end of the study (Engkizar, Jaafar, Alias, et al., 2025; Oktavia et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2024; Ummah et al., 2025). Data reduction was carried out to sort important information according to the research focus, data presentation was carried out systematically so that it was easy to understand, and conclusions were drawn based on data that had been analyzed inductively based on findings in the field. Data validity was tested through source triangulation by comparing data from various techniques and sources, as well as member checking by confirming the findings with informants to ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the interpretation. With this combination of methods, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of teachers' symbolic communication strategies in shaping the understanding of worship in children with special needs (Baroud et al., 2025; Febriani, Sindi, et al., 2022; Htay et al., 2025; Jaafar et al., 2025; Mutathahirin et al., 2022; Okenova et al., 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Teachers at the Taman Pendidikan Islam Special School in Medan apply various structured, adaptive, and meaningful symbolic communication strategies in an effort to instill religious values in children with special needs. These strategies are designed based on a deep understanding of the psychological, intellectual, and socio-emotional conditions of the students. This study found that teachers at the Taman Pendidikan Islam Special School in Medan demonstrate six symbolic communication practices in Islamic religious education that are tailored to the characteristics and needs of each student in instilling religious values. The six practices are the use of visual media, worship aids, concrete movements, role modeling, continuous habituation, and emotional touch.

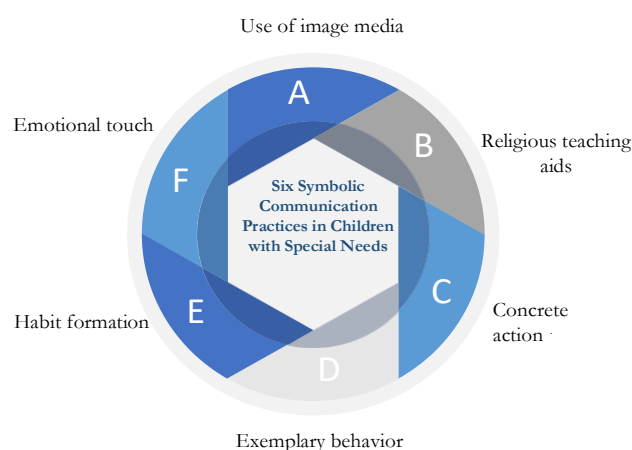


Fig1. Findings of Six Symbolic Communication Practices

Use of image media

Teachers at Taman Pendidikan Islam Special School use visual media as a visual aid in teaching worship procedures, such as wudhu and prayer. This was conveyed by one of the teachers, who said that pictures and short videos

are very helpful for students with special needs in understanding the concept of worship.

"We use pictures showing how to perform wudu (ablution) and prayer movements, as well as short videos so that children can see for themselves. After that, we practice together. They understand faster if they can see, not just hear" (Informant).

This statement shows that visualization with images or videos is a concrete symbol that is more easily accepted than verbal instructions. This finding is in line with the research by Widodo which states that visual media can stimulate more active learning enthusiasm. In the context of Islamic education (Engkizar et al., 2024; Febriani, Ottilapoyil, et al., 2022; Kaputra et al., 2021). the use of images can facilitate the delivery of Islamic material, including worship, to students with special needs. Thus, images are not only a technical aid but also an effective symbolic means of communication for building children's spiritual understanding.

Worship Props

Another form of symbolic communication used by teachers is real props such as small prayer mats, bottles of water for wudu, or mini mukena. Teachers place these objects strategically in classrooms and worship rooms. This was conveyed by an informant as follows: one student even has his own prayer mat that he always uses at school.

When I take out the prayer mat, the children immediately know that it is time to pray (Informant).

These objects become symbolic triggers that create direct associations between objects and worship activities, thereby helping children recognize the time and actions that need to be taken. Teaching aids play an important role in the smooth delivery of material to students, including students with special needs Tifani Gresilia By presenting physical objects in the learning environment, teachers can build students' emotional connection to worship through objects they use every day. This shows that symbolic communication in the classroom occurs through concrete symbols that are easily accessible to students

Concrete Movements

In addition to using pictures and teaching aids, teachers also emphasize teaching through concrete movements. For students with speech or hearing impairments, body language becomes the main bridge of communication. Hand gestures, nods, or smiles become important symbols in the process of instilling religious values. Teacher Karman said:

"If a child cannot speak, I use expressions. I point to a picture, then I move my hands to demonstrate. If they smile, it's a sign that they understand" (Informant).

The meaning of symbols is conveyed not only through words, but also through body language, which is read by students with high sensitivity. Thus, the teacher's body itself acts as a symbolic medium that connects students with the values of worship. This also includes nonverbal communication, which is communication using vocals, facial expressions, eye contact, body language, gestures, touch, and the use of space and distance. Research also shows that the method of demonstrating concrete movements is effective in teaching students how to pray. Concrete movements become symbolic communication that can be understood by children with special needs without language barriers. The movements of wudu and salat demonstrated by the teacher are not just instructions, but also symbols of the meaning of worship that are learned through the process of imitation. However, in one class, each child can receive different symbols depending on their level of understanding. This was conveyed by the informant as follows:

"Some can immediately imitate the movements of prayer, while others need weeks just to memorize the prayers. So we take an individualized approach. It cannot be generalized" (Informant).

This strategy shows that symbolic communication must be personalized; it cannot be mass-oriented. Teachers must know the character and learning style of each child, then choose the most appropriate symbols. The process of symbolic communication cannot be separated from the condition of each child, because the meaning of worship can only be understood if it is conveyed in accordance with the child's abilities. Social interaction between students is an integral part of instilling the value of worship. Children with special needs often imitate each other, and in this context, friends become powerful social symbols. This is in line with the following informant:

"If one child can already pray and follow the movements, other children who see this will imitate them. They motivate each other without us telling them to" (Informant).

This phenomenon shows that peer modeling (learning through examples from peers) plays an important role in children's communication and interaction (Melinda, 2021). The worship movements performed by one child are not only a personal expression, but also motivate and strengthen the religious behavior of other children.

Role modeling

Role modeling is practiced as a symbolic form of communication in teaching Islam to students with special needs. Informants stated that teachers must set an example in religious practices, as follows:

"If we pray first, the children will follow. They see and imitate. So we must be good examples, not just give orders" (Informant).

Students show interest in following prayers after seeing their teachers perform them regularly. This exemplary behavior is the strongest symbolic form because it is tangible and can be directly imitated. This practice not only educates the cognitive aspect, but also the emotional and spiritual aspects. Children learn through observation and imitation from their social environment (Engkizar et al., 2023). In the context of prayer education, research confirms that children easily imitate the prayer movements performed by those around them, including teachers.

Continuous Habituation

Worship activities are carried out repeatedly, such as the practice of wudu and salat with direct guidance from the teacher. The results of an interview with a teacher named Karman emphasized the importance of repetition in building students' understanding of worship activities. This is as stated below:

"Children must be accustomed to it every day. Morning prayers, congregational midday prayers, we do everything routinely. Even though they don't fully understand yet, because they are accustomed to it, they are beginning to memorize the movements."

This habit formation is part of a symbolic communication strategy that aims to instill values indirectly through repetition and routine. This will also shape children's spiritual awareness. With habit formation, worship no longer feels like an obligation, but rather a natural part of students' daily lives. Habit formation has a dual role, namely strengthening the memorization of movements and prayers through repetition, and creating a religious atmosphere that shapes children's spiritual awareness. Habituation is a planned behavior to deliberately influence someone, done repeatedly until it forms a habit in the influenced individual, including in the habituation of prayer (Helmalia & Mashudi, 2023). Through habituation, children's spiritual intelligence in memorizing worship activities can be improved.

Saniawati Larosa, as the school operator, said that the entire school system supports this symbolic process, including playing the murotal in the morning and broadcasting the call to prayer from a small loudspeaker.

"The children are used to hearing the call to prayer at school. When they hear it, they immediately go to their teachers. It is also a symbol that it is time for wudu and prayer."

This religious atmosphere creates a symbolic awareness that is not taught explicitly, but is brought to life through the atmosphere, sounds, and environment. This is a form of symbolic communication in which children learn to recognize signs of worship not only through verbal memorization, but also through consistent environmental cues. The effectiveness of this strategy is also evident from the experience of Mrs. Erma, the parent of one of the students, who said that the symbols introduced at school are also applied at home:

The teachers' symbolic communication strategy successfully formed positive associations that carried over into the family environment. Teachers integrated symbols of worship into school routines. For example, before starting each lesson, students were invited to pray together. Activities such as this became a simple but effective means of symbolic communication. According to Ewis:

"We instill in them that before doing anything, we start with prayer. Even though they are not yet fluent, we guide them. They participate because they are used to seeing and hearing it" (Informant).

This routine not only introduces religious symbols but also shapes religious thinking in children's daily lives. This is in line with Islamic education according to Al-Ghazali, which has two methods, namely habit formation and tazkiyatun nuf (M. Miftah Arief, Dina Hermina, 2022). The habit formation method is used to form good habits and abandon bad habits through guidance, practice, and hard work until the soul is accustomed to praiseworthy behavior and avoids despicable behavior. The principal explained that the school routinely holds joint worship activities such as congregational prayers, celebrations of important Islamic days such as Maulid, Isra' Mi'raj, and prayer competitions. These activities become a collective symbol that has a deep meaning for students: this was conveyed by the informant as follows

"We want children to feel that worship is not a chore, but a shared experience. When they see their friends participating too, they become enthusiastic."

Patience in conveying symbols is an important strategy in symbolic communication. Children with special needs learn at different speeds, and teachers must be able to adjust the pace of communication to the child's abilities. Thus, continuous practice in an atmosphere of patience and emotional support makes symbolic communication more effective, adaptive, and meaningful for children with special needs.

Emotional Touch

Emotional touch is expressed through praise, hugs, or light applause. This was conveyed by informants as follows:

"If they manage to raise their hands during the takbir, we praise them. We say 'good' or applaud them. This is important to make them happy" (Informant).

This emotional support strengthens the teacher-student relationship and motivates children in worship. This emotional touch is not only a form of appreciation for students, but also a symbol of affection that can build students' spiritual values. Praise and hugs become a form of symbolic language that conveys the meaning that worship is a pleasant experience, not something that is forced. This helps children to more easily accept and appreciate the values of worship with a joyful heart. These findings are in line with research,

which shows that positive reinforcement through praise and rewards increases the learning motivation of children with special needs. Symbolic communication also involves emotional support from teachers to students. When children fail to memorize prayers or perform movements incorrectly, teachers do not scold them but instead give them a hug or a small pat on the back as a sign of support. This was conveyed by the informants as follows:

“Clapping is a symbol that we appreciate their efforts, no matter how small” (Informant).

Symbols of praise or hugs convey positive meanings that strengthen the relationship between teachers and students and create a comfortable and supportive learning environment. This attitude shows that symbolic communication does not only occur when children succeed, but also when they are in the process of learning. This pattern also teaches that the meaning of worship is a process that needs to be appreciated. This study concludes that teachers at the Taman Pendidikan Islam Special School in a city implement adaptive and personalized symbolic communication strategies in instilling worship values in children with special needs. This strategy utilizes a combination of visual symbols, body movements, direct role modeling, emotional reinforcement, and the use of real teaching aids, all of which are tailored to the characteristics and abilities of each student. This approach is not only carried out at school, but also involves parents so that worship practices can be continued at home, thus creating continuity in learning. Collective symbols such as congregational prayers, Islamic holidays, and routine prayers together create a pleasant religious atmosphere, gradually fostering an understanding of the meaning of worship without coercion, and building social bonds among students.

From the results of this study, it can be understood that symbolic communication strategies are not merely technical methods in religious education, but also a means of building emotional, social, and spiritual relationships between teachers and students. The success of implementing this strategy lies in the teacher's sensitivity in understanding the unique needs of each child, patience in repeated guidance, and consistency in providing positive examples. With the support of the school, learning facilities, and parental involvement, the symbolic communication strategy at the Medan Islamic Education Special School has proven to be effective in helping children with special needs to recognize, understand, and feel the meaning of worship in a more profound and meaningful way.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the use of symbolic communication has proven effective in improving the understanding and practice of worship among children with special needs at the Taman Pendidikan Islam Kota Medan Special School. Symbols such as body movements, facial expressions, visual aids, repetition, and emotional approaches have been proven to help children understand, imitate, and slowly internalize the values of worship according to their respective abilities. Obstacles such as differences in children's characteristics and limited resources are overcome with patience, creativity, and the exemplary behavior of teachers.

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International Journal of Multidisciplinary of Higher Education (IJMURHICA)

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