

## Teacher Strategies in Cultivating Empathy and Sympathy in Students at State Junior High School 7 Muaro Jambi

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### Article Info

#### Article history:

Received: 14 January 2026

Publish: 2 March 2026

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#### Keywords:

Teacher Strategy;

Empathy;

Sympathy;

Islamic Religious Education.

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### Abstract

*Empathy and sympathy are essential elements in character development and social harmony, especially during adolescence. In the context of education, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in instilling these values thru learning integrated with Islamic moral and social teachings. However, at SMP Negeri 7 Muaro Jambi, low levels of empathy and sympathy were still found among 7th-grade students, as reflected in their lack of caring behavior and weak positive social interaction. This study aims to analyze teachers' strategies in fostering empathy and sympathy among seventh-grade students thru Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lessons. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were obtained thru observation, interviews, and documentation, which were then analyzed descriptively thru data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing processes. The research findings indicate that PAI teachers employ several key strategies, namely modeling attitudes, cultivating positive social behaviors, discussions and group work, integrating Islamic values into learning materials, and a personal approach to students. These strategies have been proven to foster the development of empathy and sympathy in students, as demonstrated by their caring attitude, mutual respect, helpfulness, and ability to understand the feelings of others in school life.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Empathy and sympathy are key competencies that underpin healthy social interactions, ethical behavior, and harmonious relationships. In the field of education, these two competencies are increasingly seen as an important foundation for the holistic development of students, especially during adolescence, which is characterized by intense cognitive, emotional, and moral dynamics (Alnim et al., 2025). Global social changes, including the weakening of interpersonal bonds post-COVID-19 pandemic and increased exposure to digital media, heighten the urgency of strengthening empathy and sympathy in schools. Therefore, schools are not only responsible for academic achievement, but also for character development and prosocial behavior as a prerequisite for a healthy society (Narsita et al., 2023).

Numerous studies confirm the central role of teachers in fostering students' empathy and social competence. Empathy-based teaching has been shown to improve psychological well-being and learning engagement because it creates a supportive and inclusive classroom environment (Huda, 2025). Character education programs that emphasize moral and ethical values also contribute to strengthening empathy, with teachers serving as the primary role models who shape students' social dispositions (Rina Susanti, 2024). Additionally, thematic

learning strategies that integrate character values into the curriculum effectively facilitate collaborative and reflective interactions that deepen empathy (Manda & Arifin, 2024). In the context of Islamic education, character education management that integrates empathy values thru a structured system correlates with strengthening students' empathetic character (Na'imah, 2018).

Although these findings confirm the importance of teacher strategies in developing empathy, there is still a research gap regarding how specific learning strategies implemented by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers can facilitate empathy and sympathy in early adolescents, particularly in culturally diverse middle school environments. Most existing research focuses on developing empathy in general or on broad character education programs, without detailing the specific teaching practices in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) that directly influence students' empathetic and sympathetic attitudes. This gap becomes increasingly relevant because Islamic educational values are expected to strengthen moral development, but classroom learning practices often do not fully achieve this goal due to limitations in interactive methods, cultural diversity, and limited learning time.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the specific strategies used by PAI teachers in fostering empathy and sympathy in seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Muaro Jambi. This research contributes to scientific novelty by presenting contextual evidence on learning approaches including modeling, social engagement practices, collaborative activities, and effective value integration in shaping students' social-emotional competencies within the context of religious education. Thru qualitative case study analysis, this research explains the mechanism by which teachers' strategies are translated into observable empathetic and sympathetic behaviors in adolescents.

In line with this, the research problem in this article is formulated as follows: "What strategies do PAI teachers implement to cultivate empathy and sympathy in 7th-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Muaro Jambi, and how do these strategies affect students' social-emotional outcomes?" The purpose of this research is to describe and analyze the specific teaching strategies used by PAI teachers to promote empathy and sympathy, and how these strategies impact students' social behavior at school.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to deeply examine teachers' strategies for fostering students' empathy and sympathy thru Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lessons in the classroom. A qualitative approach was chosen because empathy and sympathy are psychological-social constructs that are subjective, contextual, and cannot be accurately measured thru numerical indicators (Erny Wulandari, Anisa Fitri Arivia, 2025). This method allows researchers to capture experiences, perceptions, and social interactions holistically. Case studies are used because this research focuses on a specific context to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of learning strategies, rather than for statistical generalization.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 7 Muaro Jambi, Jambi Province in January 2026, with the main unit of analysis being class VII F. The research subjects consisted of PAI teachers and students from class VII F. Informant selection was done using purposive sampling, which is the selection of participants based on their relevance and proximity to the phenomenon being studied, so that the information obtained is rich and meaningful (Houghton et al., 2015). The informant criteria include: teachers who teach Islamic Religious Education (PAI), teachers who have handled students with low empathy and sympathy, and students who are directly involved in PAI learning.

This research uses qualitative data sourced from primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained thru interviews and observations of teachers and students, while secondary data came from school documents such as school profiles, organizational structures, student records, and character development programs (Nurahma & Hendriani, 2021). Data collection was carried out using three main techniques:

1. Semi-structured interviews with Islamic Education teachers and students to explore perceptions, experiences, and strategies used in fostering empathy and sympathy;
2. Direct observation of learning interactions, religious activities, and students' social behavior;
3. Documentation in the form of school archives and relevant activity records.

This combination of methods forms data triangulation, which aims to enhance the depth and credibility of findings by integrating various sources and perspectives (Nurahma & Hendriani, 2021).

Chronologically, the research procedure was carried out in several stages as follows:

- (1) determining the location and research subjects;
- (2) collecting data simultaneously thru interviews, observations, and documentation;
- (3) organizing and coding field data;
- (4) analyzing data in stages until patterns and themes are obtained;
- (5) drawing conclusions and verifying findings thru triangulation.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Fadli, 2021). Data reduction is done by selecting and focusing on data relevant to the teacher's strategy in fostering empathy and sympathy. Next, the data is presented in thematic narrative form to facilitate interpretation. The final stage is drawing conclusions and verification, which involves formulating an interpretation of the findings to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of PAI teacher strategies in the context of learning.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

SMP Negeri 7 Muaro Jambi is an A-accredited educational unit with 667 students spread across 23 learning groups, supported by 39 teachers and 6 educational staff, and equipped with adequate learning facilities and infrastructure.

#### 3.1. Research Results

##### 1. Teacher Strategies for Cultivating Empathy and Sympathy in Students

###### a. Modeling

The example set by PAI teachers at SMPN 7 Muaro Jambi plays a very important role in fostering empathy and sympathy among 7th-grade students. The teachers' patient, friendly, caring, and respectful attitudes serve as a concrete and easily emulated example. This example not only strengthens students' cognitive understanding of empathy but also shapes affective empathy and social behavior in everyday interactions.

###### b. Role Playing Method

The observation results on January 7, 2026, showed that students participated in the role-playing activity with enthusiasm and a high level of emotional engagement. They are able to express feelings according to the roles they play and demonstrate an understanding of the characters' situations. Reflection after the activity shows that students can feel and express empathy toward other characters. These findings indicate that the role-playing method is effective in fostering empathy and sympathy both cognitively and affectively.

###### c. Moral Discussion and Expression of Feelings

Observation on January 9, 2026, showed that moral discussions took place in an open and conducive atmosphere. Students are brave enough to express their opinions and are able to respond to their classmates' views with more empathetic language. This discussion helps students develop emotional understanding and sensitivity thru reflection and the exchange of perspectives, thereby strengthening empathy and compassion.

d. Positive Reinforcement

The observation results on January 7, 2026, show that the teacher consistently provides positive reinforcement for students' empathetic behavior thru simple praise and appreciation. This strategy has been proven to increase students' motivation and strengthen prosocial behavior, making empathy and sympathy a sustainable habit.

e. Collaborative Activities

Observations on January 9, 2026, showed that students actively interacted in groups, helped each other, and showed care when a friend was having difficulty. Collaborative activities encourage students to understand the feelings and needs of others, thus strengthening social relationships and empathetic attitudes.

f. Use of Islamic Stories and Educational Media

The observation results on January 7, 2026, showed that students were focused and emotionally engaged when listening to Islamic stories and watching educational videos. The reflection conducted afterward showed that this narrative medium was effective in helping students understand and internalize the values of empathy and sympathy within the context of Islamic ethics.

g. Sharing Feelings Activity

Observation on January 9, 2026, showed that the feeling-sharing activity created a calmer and warmer classroom atmosphere. Students are able to listen to their peers without interrupting and respond more politely. This activity has been proven to increase affective empathy and strengthen social bonds among students.

h. Empathetic Conflict Resolution

The observation results on January 7, 2026, indicate that minor conflicts between students were resolved thru open dialog with teacher guidance. Students are trained to express their feelings politely and listen to others. This approach is effective in developing cognitive empathy and fostering an attitude of mutual respect.

i. Character Value Habituation

Observation on January 9, 2026, showed that students spontaneously helped their friends and displayed polite behavior in daily interactions. Consistent habituation of character values contributed to the sustainable development of empathy and sympathy.

j. Warm and Safe Classroom Environment

Observations on January 7th and 9th, 2026, indicate that the atmosphere in class VIIF is relatively conducive, full of mutual respect, and has minimal open conflict. This positive classroom environment is a key supporting factor in the development of students' empathy and sympathy, as it provides a sense of security and space for social-emotional growth.

2. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Fostering Student Empathy and Sympathy

a. Inhibiting Factors

The research results indicate that the development of empathy and sympathy in 7th-grade students is not without various internal and external obstacles.

Observation and interview data from January 7th and 9th, 2026, show that these barriers are interconnected and influence the success of the strategies implemented by the teacher.

- 1) Internal student factors  
Some students exhibit emotional instability, poor self-control, and varying levels of social maturity. This condition causes some students to still focus on their own needs and feelings, making them less sensitive to the feelings of others. The PAI teacher explained that there was a noticeable difference in students' empathy abilities; some quickly showed care, while others still found it difficult to control their emotions (Interview, January 7, 2026). Observations indicate irritability, speaking in a high tone, and indifference to friends' difficulties.
  - 2) Lack of empathy training within the family  
Family background strongly influences students' empathy abilities. Students who receive less emotional attention and warm communication at home tend to be less sensitive to the feelings of others. The PAI teacher emphasized that differences in parenting styles and parental involvement have a direct impact on students' social attitudes (Interview, January 7, 2026). Observations showed that students who rarely displayed empathy tended to be quieter and less responsive to their peers.
  - 3) School Environment Outside the Classroom  
Although classroom learning has supported the development of empathy, student interactions outside the classroom have not fully reflected empathetic attitudes. Limited supervision and a tendency toward excessive joking during breaks pose their own challenges. The teacher stated that student behavior outside the classroom is often difficult to control (Interview, January 9, 2026).
  - 4) Negative influence of peers  
Unhealthy peer relationships, such as teasing and following the behavior of dominant friends, also hinder the development of empathy. Observations show that unempathetic behavior often arises thru group influence, even tho students have no personal ill intent.
- b. Supporting Factors
- 1) Harmonious family environment  
Students from families with warm communication, caring parenting styles, and the instilling of moral values tend to show empathy more easily at school. The PAI teacher stated that students who are accustomed to caring for and valuing others at home are generally easier to guide in learning the value of empathy (Interview, January 7, 2026). Observations show that students from supportive families are more capable of cooperating and demonstrating care for their peers.
  - 2) A conducive school environment  
A safe, comfortable, and bully-free classroom climate supports the development of empathy and sympathy. The teacher strives to create a communicative and humanistic learning environment so that students feel safe expressing their feelings and opinions. Observations on January 9, 2026, showed that the classroom atmosphere was relatively conducive and there was minimal teasing behavior.
  - 3) Positive peer relationships

Healthy friendships encourage students to understand and help each other. Students in supportive friendship groups demonstrate higher empathy through activities like sharing feelings, cooperation, and mutual support.

4) Culture and Social Values of the Community

Social values such as mutual cooperation, caring, and togetherness that exist in the school's surrounding community strengthen the development of student empathy. Students involved in social activities in their neighborhood tend to be more sensitive to the emotional conditions of others and are more likely to exhibit prosocial behavior at school. Both teachers and students emphasize that social experiences in society play an important role in shaping caring and empathetic attitudes.

## 2.1. Discussion

The research findings indicate that PAI teachers at SMPN 7 Muaro Jambi employ a variety of complementary strategies to cultivate empathy and sympathy in VIIF grade students. These strategies are not isolated but are integrated into the learning process and daily interactions in the classroom. Through role modeling, active learning methods, positive reinforcement, and creating a safe and warm classroom environment, teachers strive to develop students' empathy cognitively, affectively, and in their social behavior.

Teacher role modeling is the most fundamental strategy in fostering students' empathy and sympathy. The patient, friendly, caring, and respectful attitude consistently demonstrated by the teacher provides a concrete example that is easy for students to emulate. This example not only helps students cognitively understand the concept of empathy but also encourages the emergence of affective empathy and empathetic behavior in daily social interactions. This finding aligns with research (Lusiani, 2025) confirming that teachers play a primary role in shaping students' empathy, as students tend to imitate the social-emotional behaviors they observe from significant figures, such as teachers.

Beside being a role model, the role-playing method has proven effective in increasing students' empathy and sympathy. The observation results show that students are emotionally engaged in role-playing activities and are able to express feelings in accordance with the characters they are playing. Through this direct experience, students can understand the situations and feelings of others more deeply. This finding aligns with research (Nurmiani, Ruslan, 2024) which states that role-playing is effective in developing empathy because it allows students to directly experience specific social and emotional situations, rather than just understanding them theoretically. Other research also supports that this method is more effective than the lecture method, considering that empathy is an affective skill that develops through real-life experiences.

Moral discussions and activities for expressing feelings conducted in an open and conducive atmosphere also contribute to the development of students' empathy. Through this discussion, students not only learned to express their opinions but were also trained to listen to and respond to their classmates' views with more empathetic language. This process of exchanging views and mutual reflection helps students develop cognitive empathy and social sensitivity. This finding aligns with research (Azzahrah, 2025) stating that moral discussions can improve the ability to understand others' perspectives, especially when conducted in a safe and respectful environment.

Positive reinforcement is also an important strategy in fostering students' empathy and sympathy. Giving praise and appreciation for empathetic behavior has been proven to increase students' motivation to maintain such prosocial behavior. Positive reinforcement helps form empathetic habits and makes caring behavior part of students'

character. This finding aligns with research (Muhammad Fadlan Fadillah Arif et al., 2024) stating that positive reinforcement plays a significant role in shaping students' character, including empathy and social care, particularly in early adolescence.

The use of Islamic stories and educational media has also proven effective in helping students internalize the values of empathy and sympathy within the context of Islamic morals. Narrative media such as stories and videos can evoke students' emotional engagement and facilitate understanding of moral values. This finding aligns with research (Lusiani, 2025) which states that stories and fairy tales have high emotional power in instilling empathy in students, especially when linked to religious and moral values.

Sharing feelings creates a warmer classroom atmosphere and supports the development of students' affective empathy. Thru this activity, students learn to listen without interrupting, respect their classmates' feelings, and respond more politely. This finding aligns with research (Zhou, 2022) stating that sharing activities can strengthen social relationships and enhance students' emotional awareness, especially in a safe and supportive classroom environment.

Additionally, resolving conflicts empathetically thru open dialog with teacher guidance helps students develop cognitive empathy and an attitude of mutual respect. Students are trained to express their feelings politely and listen to the perspectives of others. This finding aligns with research (Nurmiani, Ruslan, 2024) which states that empathy-based conflict resolution is effective in reducing aggressive behavior and improving the ability to understand others' feelings.

Consistently instilling character values also contributes to the development of sustainable empathy and sympathy. Students spontaneously exhibit empathetic behavior in their daily lives, such as helping friends and being polite in social interactions. This finding aligns with research (Nuronia & Jannah, 2025) which confirms that habituation is the key to value-based character education, as values that are consistently practiced will become deeply ingrained in students.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This research concludes that the empathy and sympathy of seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Muaro Jambi can be effectively developed thru Islamic Religious Education teacher strategies that emphasize role modeling, interactive learning, value reflection, and the habituation of prosocial attitudes. The success of this strategy is strengthened by a harmonious family environment, a conducive school climate, positive peer relationships, and societal social values. Conversely, limitations in students' emotional maturity, a lack of empathy training at home, and an unsupportive environment are hindering factors. This finding confirms that strengthening students' empathy and sympathy requires an integrated learning approach as well as support from the school environment, family, and community.

#### **5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to SMP Negeri 7 Muaro Jambi for granting permission and providing support during the research process. Appreciation is also extended to the teachers and students who willingly participated in this study. Special thanks are given to the supervisors and colleagues for their valuable guidance, feedback, and academic support throughout the completion of this research.

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