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Research Article

Guided Discovery Learning for Student Participation and Educational Well-Being in Islamic Religious Education: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how guided discovery learning is implemented in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and how it supports learner motivation, participation, and educational well-being in a junior secondary school setting. A descriptive qualitative case study was conducted in one Grade VII IRE class at State Junior Secondary School 17 of Jambi City, Indonesia. Evidence was generated through classroom observation of 32 learners, interviews with the principal, one IRE teacher, and five students, and relevant instructional documents. Iterative thematic analysis and source-technique triangulation were used to interpret the evidence. The findings show that the teacher enacted discovery learning through stimulation, problem identification, evidence seeking, collaborative processing, verification, and generalization. This guided sequence promoted curiosity, peer-assisted reasoning, independent information seeking, confidence to voice ideas, and the application of Islamic values to everyday conduct. Peer support, school encouragement, and constructive competition enabled implementation, whereas constrained lesson time, classroom-management demands, and unequal confidence limited participation. The study positions guided discovery learning as a human-centered instructional system that can broaden equitable participation and strengthen educational well-being in values-based education.

Keywords: Discovery Learning; Educational Well-Being; Islamic Religious Education; Learner Motivation; Qualitative Case Study; Student Participation; Student Support.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) occupies a distinctive place in public schooling because it is expected to cultivate conceptual understanding, moral reasoning, spiritual awareness, and socially responsible conduct rather than transmit doctrinal information alone. Halstead [1] conceptualized Islamic education as an integrated intellectual, moral, and social project, while Niyozov and Memon [2] showed that the field has developed through ongoing negotiation among inherited traditions, contemporary institutions, and changing social demands. Sahin [3] further argued that Islamic education requires critical engagement with the ethical purposes of learning, and Akrim [4] highlighted the need for Indonesian Islamic education to remain responsive to contemporary social and technological conditions. In this study, IRE is used as the international designation for Pendidikan Agama Islam, and the focal content concerns Islamic creed and moral character (akidah-akhlak), including honesty, respect, discipline, and responsible peer interaction.

Learner motivation is central to whether IRE is experienced as a meaningful moral-learning space or as a routine subject that students passively receive. Fredricks et al. [5] framed school engagement as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement, while Ryan and Deci [6] explained that sustained motivation is more likely when learning environments support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Schunk and DiBenedetto [7] similarly emphasized the reciprocal relation between motivation, self-efficacy, goal-directed activity, and social context. Students' achievement emotions also matter, because perceived control, relevance, and value can shape interest, anxiety, persistence, and participation [8]. More recent syntheses portray engagement as a multidimensional and context-sensitive construct rather than a mere indicator of compliance [9], and demonstrate that different forms of engagement perform distinct educational functions [10]. In values-based subjects, these insights are especially important: students need opportunities to interpret ethical situations, voice tentative ideas, and connect principles with everyday decisions.

Active and student-centered pedagogies are frequently proposed as a response to passivity because they shift learners from listening alone to explaining, questioning, comparing evidence, and collaborating. Freeman et al. [11] and Prince [12] documented the educational value of active learning, while Chi [13] distinguished constructive and interactive activities from passive reception. Discovery learning belongs to this family but should not be mistaken for unrestricted exploration. Alfieri et al. [14] found that discovery-oriented instruction is most beneficial when it is supported by guidance, whereas Mayer [15] and Kirschner et al. [16] cautioned that minimally guided instruction can overload novice learners. Hmelo-Silver et al. [17], Lazonder and Harmsen [18], and Furtak et al. [19] consequently emphasized scaffolding, task design, feedback, and teacher orchestration. Contemporary reviews reinforce this position: inquiry is strongest when it is deliberately combined with direct instructional support [20], when the degree of openness is calibrated to learners' readiness [21], and when guidance, assessment, and student agency are coordinated rather than treated as competing priorities [22].

The welfare relevance of guided discovery lies in its capacity to distribute meaningful participation across the classroom. Learning and development research indicates that schools support students more effectively when academic challenge is paired with emotional safety, relational trust, and opportunities to contribute [23]. Positive teacher-student relationships are

consistently associated with engagement and achievement [24], [25], while autonomy support is most effective when it is accompanied by clear structure [26], [27]. Reeve and Cheon [28] likewise showed that autonomy-supportive instruction can be developed as a coherent teacher practice. At the peer level, cooperative learning can improve social interdependence, responsibility, and academic participation when group work is structured rather than left to informal dominance patterns [29], [30], [31]. These mechanisms are closely related to educational well-being, understood here as students' experienced access to recognition, belonging, confidence, voice, and supportive participation within the learning environment.

Discovery learning may also nurture epistemic agency. Zimmerman [32] described self-regulated learning as the purposeful management of cognition, motivation, and behavior; Panadero [33] and Dignath and Buettner [34] showed that planning, monitoring, and reflection can be fostered through instructional design. Verification and generalization stages are particularly important because they make feedback, explanation, and transfer visible to learners [35], [36], [37]. Yet the process-level implementation of discovery learning in IRE remains insufficiently described. Many accounts emphasize achievement or general activity but offer limited evidence about how each phase operates in a values-based classroom, how students experience participation, and how contextual conditions shape inclusion. This article addresses that gap through three questions: (1) How was guided discovery learning implemented in Grade VII IRE? (2) How did it support learner motivation, participation, and educational well-being? and (3) What conditions enabled or constrained implementation? The study contributes a qualitative explanation of guided discovery as a human-centered pedagogical system aligned with equitable learning opportunities and student support.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative case-study design to examine the implementation of guided discovery learning in Grade VII IRE. The design was selected because the purpose was to understand classroom processes, student responses, and implementation conditions from the perspective of participants, rather than to test a predetermined causal model. The case was bounded as one Grade VII IRE class in a public junior secondary school in Jambi City where the teacher had introduced discovery-learning activities. The analysis used the six instructional phases of discovery learning as sensitizing concepts while remaining open to themes that emerged from participant accounts and classroom observation.

The study was reported as a qualitative inquiry in line with standards that emphasize transparency in design, data generation, analysis, and interpretation [38], [39], [40]. The aim was not statistical generalization. Instead, the case was examined in sufficient detail to explain how guidance, peer interaction, and classroom conditions shaped the motivational and welfare-related meaning of discovery learning. This analytic position is consistent with qualitative reporting guidance that prioritizes methodological coherence, evidence-based interpretation, and contextual specificity [41], [42], [43].

Research Site and Participants

The research was undertaken at State Junior Secondary School 17 of Jambi City, Indonesia (SMP Negeri 17 Kota Jambi). The observed learning setting was a Grade VII IRE class of 32 students. The lesson focused on Islamic creed and moral character content (akidah-akhlak), allowing students to examine practical situations involving honesty, discipline, respect, and peer interaction. Participants were selected purposively because they were directly involved in the instructional process. The data set combined whole-class observation with in-depth interviews involving the school principal, one IRE teacher, and five students selected to provide varied accounts of participation and classroom experience. Demographic disaggregation beyond these role categories was not available in the source data.

Table 1. Case Boundary, Data Sources, and Analytical Use

Data source	Participants or materials	Purpose	Analytical contribution
Classroom observation	One Grade VII IRE class (32 observed learners)	To trace the enactment of discovery-learning phases and participation patterns	Process evidence
In-depth interviews	Principal, one IRE teacher, and five students	To capture motivation, confidence, support, barriers, and perceived meaning	Participant perspectives
Documentation	School profile, instructional notes, classroom records, and photographs	To corroborate context and classroom activity	Contextual verification

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected during the 2026 research period, with observations and interviews concentrated in April 2026. Classroom observation documented how the teacher initiated stimulation, framed problems, organized evidence seeking, supported group processing, facilitated verification, and closed activities through generalization. Interview prompts explored perceived interest, confidence, peer assistance, group work, teacher support, and implementation barriers. Documentation was used to situate the classroom activity within the school context and to compare reported practice with available instructional materials. The three techniques were intentionally combined so that the analysis did not depend on a single account or a single moment of classroom activity.

Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

Analysis proceeded iteratively through data organization, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Observation records and interview material were first organized according to the three research questions. Meaningful segments were coded in relation to discovery-learning phases, motivational responses, peer collaboration, teacher scaffolding, institutional support, participation barriers, and value application. Codes were then compared across teacher, student, principal, and documentary evidence to construct theme matrices. Braun and Clarke [38]

describe thematic analysis as a flexible but systematic approach to identifying patterned meaning; in this study, that flexibility was used to connect an a priori instructional sequence with inductively derived participation and well-being themes. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and the explicit comparison of convergent and divergent evidence [39], [40].

Ethical care focused on confidentiality, respectful treatment of participants, and the removal of student names from the manuscript. The source study did not record a formal institutional ethics approval number. Accordingly, no ethics identifier is reported here. The qualitative data are treated as non-public because interview material may contain contextual information that could permit indirect identification in a single-school case. The methodological boundaries, including the single-site setting and absence of a quantitative motivation measure, are addressed explicitly in the Limitations section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Guided Discovery Learning as a Structured Instructional Sequence

The classroom evidence indicates that discovery learning was enacted as a guided sequence rather than as unstructured student exploration. The teacher began by presenting questions, short stories, and familiar moral situations before formal explanation. These stimuli were anchored in school-life experiences such as cheating, ridicule, disrespect, and difficulties maintaining discipline. Students were then invited to identify the moral problem, consider likely causes and consequences, and relate it to IRE principles. This opening made the topic immediately interpretable because learners encountered it first as a social situation rather than as a definition to be memorized.

The middle of the lesson involved purposeful evidence seeking and collaborative sense-making. Students consulted textbooks, class notes, relevant religious references, and, where permitted, accessible digital information. They compared the information gathered, discussed which claims were relevant to the problem, and prepared a group response. The teacher remained actively present by clarifying the task, checking the relevance of sources, redirecting off-topic discussion, and encouraging groups that encountered difficulty. Verification occurred through presentations, peer questions, and teacher clarification. In the final phase, the class developed generalizations that related the lesson to daily conduct. Rather than closing with a teacher summary alone, students were asked to articulate what the value meant for their own interactions with classmates and teachers.

Table 2. Observed Enactment of Guided Discovery Learning in Grade VII IRE

Phase	Teacher scaffolding	Student activity	Participation and well-being significance
Stimulation	Used questions, stories, and familiar moral situations before formal explanation	Recalled experiences and responded to initial prompts	Created relevance and reduced the distance between IRE content and daily life

Phase	Teacher scaffolding	Student activity	Participation and well-being significance
Problem identification	Narrowed broad value issues into discussable school-life problems	Identified causes, consequences, and affected relationships	Invited student voice and moral reasoning
Evidence seeking	Directed students to accessible books, notes, religious references, and approved sources	Located and shared information within groups	Supported autonomy with accessible pathways for participation
Collaborative processing	Monitored discussion, prompted comparison, and redirected off-task talk	Compared evidence, debated explanations, and prepared responses	Developed peer assistance, shared responsibility, and confidence
Verification	Facilitated presentations, questions, and conceptual clarification	Presented findings and responded to feedback	Made understanding, accountability, and voice visible
Generalization	Linked the lesson to concrete conduct and summarized key principles	Formulated practical implications for school and peer life	Supported transfer, meaning, and moral relevance

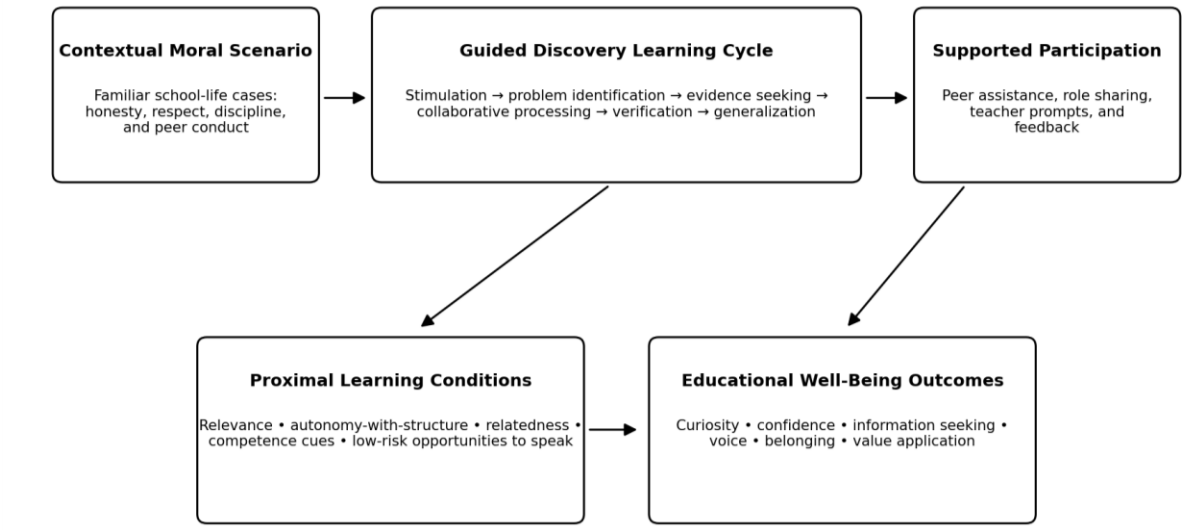

Figure 1. Interpretive Pathway Linking Guided Discovery Learning to Educational Well-Being

Motivational Participation and Educational Well-Being

The most visible change reported across observation and interviews was a shift from passive listening toward more active participation. Students were more willing to answer questions when lessons began with situations recognizable from their school lives. The evidence did not suggest that every learner became equally vocal; however, the use of contextual scenarios made initial participation easier because students could respond from lived experience before engaging with abstract terms. This process appeared to create curiosity and emotional relevance, two conditions that helped sustain attention during later stages of evidence seeking and discussion.

Peer collaboration functioned as a second motivational support. Group work gave students a smaller and less threatening space in which to test ideas, ask questions, and distribute tasks before public presentation. Several interview accounts described group discussion as more enjoyable and easier to follow because students could seek clarification from peers. This did not eliminate participation inequalities, yet it moderated them: students who hesitated to speak to the whole class could first contribute in a smaller group. The peer context therefore served as a bridge between individual uncertainty and public participation.

A third pattern concerned epistemic agency. Students were not only asked to repeat teacher explanations but to search for information, compare claims, justify their reasoning, and connect religious principles with concrete consequences. These activities required learners to make judgments about relevance and evidence. The observed classroom did not treat autonomy as working alone; it treated autonomy as participation within structured tasks and accessible resources. Students' confidence was most visible when they had time to prepare, when group roles were clear, and when teacher feedback framed errors as part of clarification rather than public failure.

Table 3. Qualitative Evidence Matrix: Motivation, Participation, and Educational Well-Being

Analytic theme	Evidence across sources	Interpretive meaning	Educational well-being relevance
Contextual relevance and curiosity	Observation of school-life moral cases; student accounts of lessons feeling easier to remember	Everyday scenarios activated attention before formal explanation	Students experienced content as meaningful and accessible
Peer-assisted participation	Group discussion, joint information seeking, and shared presentation preparation	Peers functioned as immediate cognitive and emotional support	Belonging and lower-risk participation were strengthened
Epistemic agency	Students searched, compared, justified, and generalized information	Learning moved beyond recall toward evidence-informed judgment	Competence and voice were supported through visible reasoning
Confidence to express ideas	Presentations, peer questions, teacher clarification, and rehearsal within groups	Public participation depended on scaffolded opportunities rather than confidence alone	Recognition and psychological safety became instructional concerns

Analytic theme	Evidence across sources	Interpretive meaning	Educational well-being relevance
Value application	Generalizations linked IRE principles with conduct toward peers and teachers	Moral concepts were translated into practical social judgment	Students connected learning with relational responsibility

Conditions Enabling and Constraining Inclusive Implementation

The quality of implementation depended on enabling conditions beyond the discovery-learning steps themselves. Peer assistance was a practical resource because students shared sources, explained ideas, and helped prepare presentations. The principal's account also indicated institutional openness to active and innovative teaching, which legitimized the teacher's use of collaborative tasks and classroom resources. Constructive competition contributed energy when students encouraged one another to answer, present, and demonstrate understanding; however, its value depended on remaining cooperative rather than rewarding only the most vocal learners.

Three constraints limited the equitable reach of the model. First, the available lesson period did not always accommodate all stages in equal depth. When discussion became productive, there was sometimes insufficient time for each group to present and for the whole class to build a complete generalization. Second, group activity increased classroom-management demands. Productive discussion coexisted with noise, uneven attention, and occasional off-task interaction, requiring continuous teacher circulation and task redirection. Third, student confidence was uneven. Some students were comfortable within groups but became anxious when speaking before the whole class. Their concerns included making mistakes, forgetting their points, and being questioned by classmates. These conditions show that visible activity should not automatically be interpreted as equitable participation.

Table 4. Enabling and Constraining Conditions Shaping Implementation

Condition	Case evidence	Effect on participation	Implication for practice
Peer support	Students searched, discussed, and prepared responses together	Reduced isolation and supported shared responsibility	Assign complementary roles and use peer tutoring
Institutional encouragement	School leadership supported active and innovative teaching	Legitimized experimentation with student-centered tasks	Provide time, resources, and professional learning
Constructive competition	Active students encouraged peers to respond and present	Raised energy but could privilege confident students	Keep competition group-oriented and inclusive
Limited lesson time	Some discussions or presentations were shortened	Reduced opportunities for complete verification and generalization	Use time blocks, staged presentation, and concise cases

Condition	Case evidence	Effect on participation	Implication for practice
Classroom-management complexity	Noise and off-task talk appeared in some group interactions	Could dilute focus despite high activity	Set task norms, visible roles, and monitoring routines
Uneven confidence	Some students hesitated to present publicly	Restricted voice for quieter learners	Provide rehearsal, rotating presenters, and low-risk feedback

Discussion

The findings indicate that the central educational value of discovery learning in this IRE class was not discovery in isolation, but guided discovery. The six phases created a recognizable sequence through which a familiar moral situation was transformed into a problem, a problem into an evidence-seeking task, and an evidence-seeking task into an opportunity for explanation and value application. This interpretation is consistent with the long-standing argument that active learning is strongest when students construct and interact with ideas rather than merely receive information [11], [12], [13]. It also supports the cautions raised by Mayer [15] and Kirschner et al. [16]: inexperienced learners do not benefit simply because responsibility is transferred to them. In the present case, the teacher continued to provide cognitive and social structure through problem framing, source guidance, monitoring, clarification, and feedback. The teacher's role was therefore reconfigured, not reduced.

This pattern aligns closely with research showing that scaffolding is a defining condition of productive inquiry. Hmelo-Silver et al. [17] defended scaffolded inquiry as a route to meaningful learning, and Lazonder and Harmsen [18] found that guidance strengthens the benefits of inquiry-based activity. Furtak et al. [19] similarly showed that the effectiveness of inquiry depends on how instructional supports are embedded in classroom practice. The more recent synthesis by de Jong et al. [20] is particularly relevant because it rejects a simplistic opposition between inquiry and direct instruction. The case presented here illustrates a practical form of that integration: students explored and reasoned, while the teacher supplied the boundaries, conceptual clarification, and performance cues required to keep exploration educationally productive. Dah et al. [21] and Areepattamannil [22] further caution that the level of inquiry openness must fit learners' preparation, classroom discourse, and assessment practices. The observed Grade VII model was appropriately neither fully open nor teacher-dominated; it was guided, sequenced, and socially supported.

The study also extends discussion of motivation by showing that relevance was produced through the structure of the lesson. Students did not encounter honesty, respect, discipline, and peer conduct as detached moral vocabulary. Instead, the teacher used recognizable social situations to create a point of entry for personal reflection. This is consistent with Ryan and Deci's [6] account of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic conditions for internalized motivation, as well as Schunk and DiBenedetto's [7] emphasis on the interaction between social environment and self-efficacy. The evidence also complements Pekrun's [8] control-value account: students' willingness to participate can plausibly increase when tasks appear understandable, relevant, and worthy of effort. Wong and Liem [9] caution against reducing engagement to observable behavior alone; in the case evidence, engagement included curiosity, readiness to seek information, deliberation with peers, and confidence to

share a developing interpretation. Reeve et al. [10] likewise show that different engagement forms support different educational purposes. The qualitative contribution here is to describe the classroom mechanisms through which these forms were enabled in a values-based subject.

The article's novelty lies in conceptualizing guided discovery learning as a human-centered participation system for IRE, rather than as a generic technique for improving activity or test performance. The pathway in Figure 1 demonstrates that the instructional sequence operated through proximal learning conditions: relevance, autonomy-with-structure, peer relatedness, competence cues, and low-risk opportunities to speak. This framing draws on Darling-Hammond et al. [23], who argue that learning and development depend on environments that integrate academic and relational supports. It also resonates with evidence that teacher-student relationships shape engagement [24], [25] and that autonomy support should be combined with structure rather than treated as its alternative [26], [27]. Reeve and Cheon [28] further identify autonomy-supportive teaching as a malleable practice that can be cultivated through specific instructional behaviors. In the present case, such behaviors were visible in the teacher's questioning, monitoring, feedback, and gradual release of responsibility.

Peer collaboration was not merely a classroom-management device; it was a student-support mechanism. Johnson and Johnson [29] describe cooperative learning as productive when positive interdependence and individual accountability are designed into tasks. Kyndt et al. [30] and Gillies [31] likewise caution that the benefit of group work depends on structured interaction. The case confirms this qualification. Peer assistance supported hesitant students by enabling preliminary talk and shared information seeking, yet vocal students could still dominate presentations. This difference explains why group work alone cannot be taken as evidence of inclusion. The implementation implications are therefore concrete: roles should rotate, individual preparation should precede group reporting, groups should have rehearsal time, and verification should include multiple channels for contribution. Such practices would allow the model to preserve the energy of collaboration while reducing the risk that confidence differences become participation differences.

The findings also contribute to the study of educational well-being. Rather than equating well-being with general satisfaction, this article uses it to describe students' experienced access to recognition, belonging, confidence, voice, and meaningful support within learning. The observed generalization stage was important because it connected IRE content with everyday social responsibility; it gave students an opportunity to translate values into conduct. This process has relevance for self-regulated learning, where learners plan, monitor, and reflect on their engagement with tasks [32], [33], [34]. It also links to formative feedback research, which shows that feedback is productive when it helps learners understand where they are, where they need to go, and how to proceed [35], [36], [37]. In practical terms, the results suggest that IRE teachers can support educational well-being by designing discovery activities as gradual participation pathways: begin with a recognizable case, provide accessible sources, make roles visible, allow rehearsal, invite multiple forms of response, and close with a guided moral generalization.

At the institutional level, the study indicates that active pedagogy should be treated as part of student-support provision rather than as an individual teacher's optional innovation. Classroom time, resource availability, group-management expertise, and school encouragement shape whether guided discovery becomes a rigorous learning process or a

superficially active one. This has particular relevance for education systems seeking equitable learning opportunities: a model that depends on voice and participation must also account for who is quiet, who feels safe to speak, and who receives sufficient preparation to contribute. The study therefore offers a contextually grounded contribution to the WESW agenda by demonstrating how a human-centered instructional design can strengthen participation and well-being in a culturally situated religious-education classroom. Future studies should test the proposed pathway across multiple schools, include gender-disaggregated and disability-sensitive analysis, and combine qualitative process evidence with validated measures of motivation, school belonging, and learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Guided discovery learning in Grade VII IRE was implemented as a structured sequence of stimulation, problem identification, evidence seeking, collaborative processing, verification, and generalization. The sequence supported learner motivation and participation by connecting values-based content with students' everyday experiences, creating peer-assisted opportunities to reason, and giving students visible occasions to search, explain, verify, and apply ideas. The study's central contribution is to show that discovery learning can operate as a human-centered participation system when autonomy is paired with teacher scaffolding, clear task structure, supportive peer interaction, and feedback. Peer support, school encouragement, and constructive competition strengthened implementation, whereas limited time, classroom-management demands, and uneven confidence constrained equitable participation. For IRE practice, the evidence supports a guided model that uses familiar moral cases, accessible learning resources, rotating roles, rehearsal time, and inclusive verification routines. Such design can strengthen not only conceptual understanding but also the recognition, voice, belonging, and confidence that constitute educational well-being.

LIMITATIONS

This single-site qualitative case study examined one Grade VII IRE class in a public junior secondary school. Its findings are analytically transferable to comparable settings but should not be statistically generalized. The study did not include pre-post measurement of motivation, academic outcomes, or school well-being; the claims therefore concern perceived and observed processes rather than quantified effects. The source data did not provide gender-disaggregated, disability-related, or socioeconomic participation data, which limits the study's ability to examine intersectional equity patterns. In addition, the study reported no formal ethics approval number and no independent participant-member checking procedure. Future research should use multi-site comparative designs, combine observation with validated learner measures, examine participation by gender and other equity-relevant characteristics, and assess whether teacher professional development can sustain inclusive guided discovery practices.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

F.I. developed the study concept, research design, data-collection strategy, analytic approach, and initial manuscript. H. contributed to the interpretation and refinement of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript and accept responsibility for the integrity of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors used ChatGPT to assist with manuscript restructuring, academic-English refinement, and citation-style organization. After using the tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary and assume full responsibility for the final published work.

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