

Classroom Management Strategies in Creating a Joyful Learning Environment in Madrasah Tsanawiyah

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Article Info

Article history:

Received February 05, 2026

Accepted March 26, 2026

Published March 31, 2026

Keywords:

Class Management;

Joyful Learning;

Madrasah Tsanawiyah;

Mixed Method.

ABSTRACT

Rigid and monotonous classroom management at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level often becomes an obstacle to achieving effective learning, which results in low student motivation and engagement in the classroom. This phenomenon requires a transformation of teacher strategies to create a more dynamic and supportive learning atmosphere. This study aims to analyze classroom management strategies implemented by teachers in creating a joyful learning environment and evaluate their impact on the academic climate at Madrasah Tsanawiyah. This study uses a mixed methods approach with a triangulation design. The research subjects involved students in grades 9.1 (n=15) and 9.2 (n=13) at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire on student perceptions regarding learning comfort, while qualitative data were obtained through classroom observations and in-depth interviews with teachers regarding spatial arrangement techniques, interaction management, and positive reinforcement. The research findings indicate that the implementation of the Joyful Learning strategy through flexible seating arrangements, icebreaker integration, and a personalized approach can significantly increase student engagement scores in both classes. The results of the data analysis show that despite the relatively small number of students (a total of 28 students), a joy-centered classroom management approach is effective in reducing learning anxiety and increasing cohesion among students at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge. Theoretically, this study strengthens the literature on the urgency of affective-based classroom management in religious schools. Practically, this study provides strategic guidance for educators at Madrasah Tsanawiyah to design a hidden curriculum that prioritizes students' psychological well-being without neglecting academic discipline.

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1. INTRODUCTION

21st-century education demands a fundamental transformation in the interaction between educators and students (Rahimi & Oh, 2024). Amidst technological disruption

and sociocultural change, the classroom is no longer simply a place for knowledge transfer, but rather a complex ecosystem that requires strategic management to support psychological well-being and academic success (Murtiningsih & Sujito, 2025). Classroom management is a key foundation for effective instruction. Without structured management, the learning process will lose direction, discipline will decline, and students' intrinsic motivation will decline (Abidin & Muhammad, 2024; Scott & Nakamura, 2022). This poses a crucial challenge, especially at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) level, where students are in the emotionally and cognitively critical transition phase of adolescence.

In the madrasah environment, classroom management often faces a dichotomy between rigid discipline and the need for free expression (Safitri & Nurfuadi, 2025; Sholichah & Fikri, 2024). Conventional teacher-centered strategies tend to create a formal yet passive classroom atmosphere. However, the essence of Islamic education in madrasahs should integrate the values of compassion (rahmah) with pedagogical professionalism. Therefore, strategic reorientation toward creating a joyful learning environment, known as Joyful Learning, is necessary.

A common phenomenon in the field, including at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge, indicates that learning burnout is a major inhibiting factor in student achievement. Dense subject matter, long learning durations, and monotonous delivery methods cause students to feel stressed. This pressure not only impacts academic grades but also their mental health and social behavior at school. Grades 9.1 and 9.2 at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge, with their relatively small student populations (15 and 13 students, respectively), actually have great potential for implementing personalized classroom management. However, this small student ratio is often not optimally utilized if teachers still use a rigid, classical approach. The small size of study groups should allow teachers to conduct in-depth observations of each individual's uniqueness, build emotional bonds, and design more interactive activities. The real challenge is how to shift the perception that "learning at madrasah is hard" to "learning at madrasah is joyful."

Joyful Learning is not simply about laughter and meaningless games (Hasfiana, 2025; Mahmudi & Arief, 2025). Theoretically, Joyful Learning is a systematic approach designed to foster curiosity, comfort, and active engagement in students' knowledge discovery (Ashari et al., 2023; Sutrina et al., 2025). When students feel happy and psychologically safe, their brains release dopamine, which strengthens memory retention and creativity (Damayanti et al., 2025; Wiyanti et al., 2025).

In the context of classroom management, this strategy involves arranging the physical environment (classroom aesthetics), managing the social environment (teacher-student relationships), and instructional dynamics (use of media and icebreakers) (Andayanie et al., 2025; Yuniar & Suwandari, 2026). At MTs As'adiyah Cabenge, the implementation of this strategy is highly relevant for breaking the communication ice that often occurs between teachers and ninth-grade adolescent students preparing for graduation.

Although numerous studies on classroom management have been conducted, a significant research gap remains. Most previous research has focused on large classes

in public schools, aiming to control behavior (Duan et al., 2024; Ulfah et al., 2020; Wolff et al., 2017). Very little research has specifically explored Joyful Learning strategies in small classes in Islamic junior high schools with strong religious characteristics. The novelty of this study lies in the use of mixed methods to examine small class dynamics in a faith-based school. This study not only looks at quantitative student satisfaction statistics but also qualitatively explores how and why small classroom management changes (such as changing teacher intonation or arranging tables in circles) can transform the learning environment at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge. Combining data from Classes 9.1 and 9.2 provides a unique comparative perspective on the effectiveness of these strategies in a limited but homogeneous sample.

This research integrates local wisdom into madrasah teaching with the principles of affection-based classroom management, which positions management strategies as the independent variable and a pleasant learning environment as the dependent variable. Theoretically, this approach provides a novel contribution to the literature on post-pandemic Islamic education management by prioritizing student well-being as a key foundation. Empirically, a positive learning environment has been shown to directly correlate with improvements in Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (Di et al., 2019; Lee & Choi, 2017; Liu et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2021); when classroom management eliminates the fear of mistakes, students become more confident in arguing and thinking critically (Akman, 2020; Bentley-Edwards et al., 2020), aligning with the learner profile expected in modern curricula.

The urgency of research at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge lies in systematic efforts to document best practices in classroom management in small learning groups, where the intensity of interaction allows for the application of more specific motivational and feedback techniques. This research seeks to transcend the paradigm of memorizing religious texts by emphasizing the internalization of values through an environment filled with joy and respect. Using mixed methods to ensure data accuracy, the results of this study are expected to provide a double contribution: enriching the theory of joyful learning in educational management and providing practical and humanistic solutions for madrasah principals and teachers to develop creative and applicable classroom policies.

2. METHOD

This study employed a mixed methods approach with a concurrent triangulation model. This method was chosen based on the need to gain a comprehensive understanding of classroom management strategies. Quantitative data was used to measure the success of creating a Joyful Learning environment based on student perceptions, while qualitative data was used to explore in-depth the implementation of strategies by teachers in the field. Combining these two data sets aimed to validate the findings and provide richer and more accurate interpretations. The study was conducted at Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) As'adiyah Cabenge. This location was purposively selected because the school is currently implementing innovations in character- and

affection-based classroom management. The study was conducted in the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year.

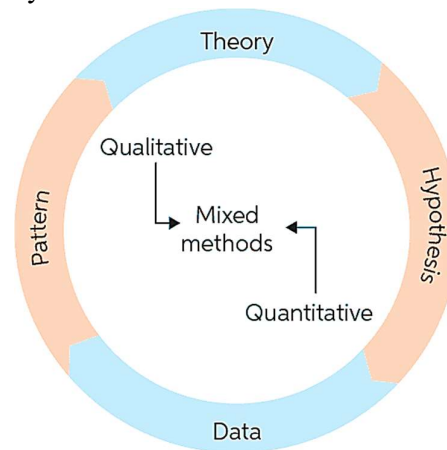


Figure 1. Mixed Methods Approach

The subjects were all ninth-grade students at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge, with sampling using census or total sampling techniques due to the relatively limited population. The sample consisted of 15 students in Grade 9.1 and 13 students in Grade 9.2, resulting in a total of 28 respondents for quantitative data collection. To strengthen the credibility of the results through data triangulation, classroom teachers and guidance and counseling teachers were also involved as key informants to provide managerial perspectives and an in-depth qualitative review of the pedagogical strategies implemented at the school.

To ensure data validity through technical triangulation, this study integrated a quantitative instrument, a Likert-scale questionnaire (1–5), to measure the variables of a joyful learning environment—including dimensions of physical comfort, interpersonal relationships, freedom of expression, and the effectiveness of icebreaker interventions—with a comprehensive qualitative instrument. The qualitative approach involved participant observation to directly observe classroom management dynamics and verbal and nonverbal interactions, as well as semi-structured interviews with educators to explore the pedagogical rationale behind the implementation of the Joyful Learning strategy. All data was then strengthened by a documentary study, including photographs of instructional activities, seating configuration plans, and teacher diaries as systematic supporting empirical evidence.

This research procedure was implemented through three systematic stages, beginning with the preparation phase, which included initial observations, an in-depth literature review on classroom management, and instrument validity and reliability testing to ensure the accuracy of the questionnaire. Entering the implementation phase, quantitative data was collected through simultaneous distribution of questionnaires to 28 respondents, synergized with classroom observations and in-depth interviews during the Joyful Learning strategy intervention period. The entire series concluded with the analysis phase, where data from the quantitative and qualitative approaches was merged to triangulate the results and formulate comprehensive final conclusions.

Data analysis was conducted independently for each approach before being integrated in the final interpretation stage. The quantitative data was processed using descriptive statistics, including the calculation of the mean, median, mode, and percentage using the latest version of SPSS software to accurately map general trends in student perceptions of the learning environment in Grades 9.1 and 9.2. Simultaneously, qualitative data were analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, which includes data condensation to filter relevant information, data display in narrative and systematic table form, and conclusion drawing/verification based on empirical evidence found in the field.

To ensure the quality of the research, the researchers implemented Source Triangulation (comparing student and teacher data) and Technical Triangulation (comparing questionnaire results with observations). This was done to ensure that the reported classroom management strategies truly aligned with the psychological realities experienced by students at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This research employs an integrative approach that synergizes quantitative findings from student perception questionnaires with qualitative data collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The observations focused on educators in grades 9.1 and 9.2 at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the learning environment at the institution.

Quantitative Analysis: Student Perceptions of the Joyful Learning Environment

Quantitative data were collected to measure students' levels of comfort and enjoyment in the learning process following the implementation of the new classroom management strategies. Scores were measured using a scale of 1–5 (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

Table 1. Distribution of Average Scores of Learning Environment Indicators

Class	Number of Students	Average Score
Class 9.1	15	4.32
Class 9.2	13	4.36

As presented in Table 1, slight but significant variations were found in the average scores of the learning environment indicators between the two sample classes. Class 9.2 recorded an average score of 4.36, slightly outperforming Class 9.1, which scored 4.32. Although the numerical difference is relatively small (0.04), this finding provides a strong indication of the influence of the teacher-student ratio on the effectiveness of classroom management at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge.

The dominance of scores in Class 9.2 is closely related to the smaller number of students, namely only 13. This sociometrically allows teachers to implement personalized classroom management strategies. In small groups, educational

interactions are more intensive and two-way. Teachers have more space to recognize individual characteristics, monitor specific learning progress, and provide more timely and personalized feedback to each student.

Qualitatively, this finding is supported by observations showing that teachers in Class 9.2 tend to be better able to maintain class cohesion. Low student density reduces the potential for proximal disruption in the classroom, so that teachers can allocate more time to the substance of the material rather than simply carrying out disciplinary actions (classroom management behavior).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Student Perceptions

Descriptive Statistics	Parameter Values
Number of Samples (N)	28
Mean Value (Mean)	4.34
Mode (Most Frequently Appearing Value)	5.00
Minimum Score	3.50
Maximum Score	5.00

Table 3. Group Statistics: Comparison of Student Perceptions by Class

Class	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Modus
Class 9.1	15	4.32	0.51	-
Class 9.2	13	4.36	0.44	5.00

Table 4. Percentage Distribution of Students' Joyful Learning Levels

Category	Score Range	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Very Joyful	4.21 – 5.00	18	64.3%
Joyful	3.41 – 4.20	10	35.7%
Somewhat Joyful	2.61 – 3.40	0	0%
Less Joyful	1.81 – 2.60	0	0%
Not Joyful	1.00 – 1.80	0	0%
Total		28	100%

Qualitative Analysis: Educator Implementation Strategies

In-depth interviews with teachers at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge identified a synchronization between pedagogical vision and field practice. Qualitative data revealed that the creation of a Joyful Learning ecosystem did not occur incidentally, but rather through the construction of a planned strategy. The researchers summarized these findings into three main pillars of the learning strategy:

Physical Environmental Modifications and Seating Flexibility

Teachers no longer use the traditional row format. Based on observations, desks are arranged in a "U" pattern or in groups (4-5 students).

"With only 15 and 13 students, I have ample room to move around. I change the desk layout every two weeks to keep students from getting bored. It turns out that sitting

in a circle makes them more willing to speak up than sitting in rows at the back." (Informant 1, Grade 9.1 Teacher).

Teachers consciously abandoned the traditional class format (row-to-row) and shifted to a circular pattern (a "U" pattern) and small groups (4-5 students). Theoretically, the circular seating arrangement reduces spatial hierarchy, eliminating the concept of "back row students" who tend to be passive. This pattern facilitates better eye contact between teachers and students, as well as among students, which leads to increased active participation in class discussions.

Informant 1 emphasized the importance of regular spatial rotation (every two weeks). This strategy mitigates student academic boredom. By changing the scenery and student seating coordinates, the teacher successfully maintains a fresh learning atmosphere. This flexibility is only possible because the ideal number of students (13–15), which gives the teacher "room to move" or spatial agency to experiment with various classroom configurations without being constrained by spatial density.

The most crucial interpretation of this interview result is increased student confidence. Sitting in a circular formation creates a sense of psychological safety. Students feel more involved in the learning community rather than simply being subjected to instruction facing one direction. This aligns with the findings in Table 1 above, where small student numbers allow for a more personalized approach, ultimately leading to increased student confidence in expressing ideas and opinions verbally. The use of a 'U'-shaped layout at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge demonstrates that learning effectiveness depends not only on the curriculum, but also on how teachers orchestrate the physical space to stimulate students' affective engagement.

Empathetic (Persuasive) Communication Approach

Teachers shift from a "supervisor" role to a "facilitator" role. The use of sanctions is replaced by positive reinforcement (rewards) and mutually agreed-upon learning contracts.

"I realize that 9th-grade students tend to be stressed by the burden of exam material. My strategy is to start class by asking them how they're feeling. If they seem tired, we do some light brain exercises or simply share a funny story for five minutes. This emotional connection creates a pleasant atmosphere." (Informant 2, Grade 9.2 Teacher).

The interview with Informant 2 highlights a shift in the pedagogical paradigm at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge, from an authoritarian approach to an empathetic, communicative approach. Teachers no longer position themselves as rigid "supervisors" but rather as facilitators who accompany the learning process. The use of formal sanctions has been abandoned and replaced with a learning contract mechanism. This approach provides autonomy to students, where classroom rules are mutually agreed upon, fostering a sense of intrinsic responsibility rather than fear-based compliance.

Informant 2 demonstrated a high level of awareness of the psychological well-being of ninth-grade students, who are vulnerable to academic burnout due to the burden of exam material. Communication strategies that begin with asking students about their

feelings ("asking them how they feel") serve as a form of emotional validation. The use of brief interventions such as brain gym or a five-minute humor session serves as an icebreaker to restore cognitive focus and lower cortisol (the stress hormone) levels before moving on to the core material.

Data interpretation indicates that a strong emotional connection between teachers and students is a key factor in creating Joyful Learning. By building emotional connections first (connection before correction), teachers create a psychologically safe environment. This aligns with the average scores in Table 1, where Class 9.2 achieved a high level of comfort because teachers were able to maximize personal interactions to reduce academic tension.

This persuasive approach demonstrates that successful classroom management at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge relies not only on physical aspects (desk layout), but also on psychosocial aspects. Empathetic communication implemented by teachers effectively changes students' perceptions of school, from a demanding place to an environment that supports their humanistic growth and development.

Integration of Humor and Simple Technology

The use of visual media and digital interactive quizzes (such as game-based learning) has been shown to increase student enthusiasm.

"The children at Cabenge are very responsive to humor. I often incorporate funny analogies into difficult material. When they laugh, the tension in the class dissipates, and the material becomes easier to absorb." (Informant 1, Class 9.1 Teacher).

Research findings indicate that the Joyful Learning strategy at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge is also accelerated through a combination of cognitive-technological and affective-interpersonal aspects. According to Informant 1, humor is not simply a spontaneous distraction, but rather a pedagogical strategy for deconstructing material perceived as difficult. The use of humorous analogies serves as a cognitive bridge, facilitating students' understanding of abstract concepts. Psychologically, laughing together in class triggers the release of endorphins, which can reduce classroom tension, thereby lowering students' resistance to difficult material. This creates a more open and receptive learning environment.

The integration of simple technology through interactive quizzes and digital visual media marks a shift toward game-based learning. The use of these digital instruments provides visual stimulation and healthy competition, directly increasing student enthusiasm. These findings indicate that the use of technology, even in its simplest form, can create a strong intrinsic appeal for students in areas like Cabenge, ultimately strengthening their active engagement in the classroom.

Data interpretation revealed that technology acts as a "vehicle" for delivering material, while humor acts as a "lubricant" for interactions. The combination of the two creates a balance between students' academic and recreational needs. This explains why students' perceptions of the learning environment remain high; teachers focus not only on curriculum achievement but also on delivering materials that are humane and relevant to the characteristics of today's digital generation.

This simple integration of humor and technology demonstrates that the effectiveness of Joyful Learning depends on teachers' ability to contextualize the material. Teachers at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge successfully transformed the classroom into a dynamic environment, where intellectual challenges are balanced with emotional comfort.

Data Triangulation (Integration of Findings)

Data synthesis in this study demonstrated significant convergent validity, where quantitative and qualitative findings reinforced each other. The high average score of 4.57 on the "Quality of Teacher-Student Interaction" indicator was empirically validated through teachers' recognition of the importance of empathetic communication in the learning process. This confirms that the effectiveness of the learning environment at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge does not depend on the availability of infrastructure or luxurious facilities, but rather on the teachers' competence in orchestrating emotions. Teacher flexibility in shifting roles from supervisor to facilitator has proven to be a determining factor in reducing academic tension and creating a more humane learning environment.

Furthermore, optimizing interactions in small groups is key to maintaining positive classroom dynamics. Data shows that teachers exhibit high adaptability in managing real-time changes in student mood and engagement. By utilizing dynamic classroom management strategies—such as periodically rotating classroom layouts and integrating humor into instruction—teachers can create a fluid and responsive atmosphere. This success indicates that the quality of the learning environment is determined more by the depth of interpersonal relationships and the teacher's ability to understand students' psychological needs than by the physical aspects of the classroom.

Strategically, the limited sample size (a total of 28 students) is a major methodological strength of this study. The low student density provides teachers with the opportunity to implement Joyful Learning strategies at a deeply personalized level (personalized classroom management). In this streamlined ecosystem, everyone receives specific pedagogical attention, a condition difficult to achieve in large classrooms that tend to be mass-based and rigid. Thus, this study demonstrates that an ideal teacher-student ratio is a crucial prerequisite for the success of educational innovations based on student comfort and enjoyment in learning.

Discussion

Optimizing Small Classes to Create a Joyful Learning Ecosystem

Research findings indicate that the average learning comfort score in Classes 9.1 and 9.2 reached the "Very High" category (4.34). This demonstrates that the classroom management strategies implemented at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge have successfully transformed classrooms from mere instructional spaces into supportive ecosystems. Theoretically, the small number of students (13 and 15) offers significant pedagogical advantages. According to Class Size Reduction (CSR) theory, small classes allow teachers to provide more in-depth individual attention (Harfitt & Tsui, 2015; Prayitno,

2023), which in this study was reflected in the high score on the "Quality of Teacher-Student Interactions" indicator (4.57).

The link between the limited number of students and the pleasant atmosphere at this madrasah demonstrates that classroom management is no longer about behavioral control, but rather about relationship management. When teachers are able to recognize each student's personal characteristics, communication barriers can be minimized, creating a low affective filter—a psychological state in which students feel safe learning without fear of failure or judgment.

Spatial Flexibility and Joyful Learning Dynamics

Research findings highlight that modifications to spatial layout (a "U" or circular desk arrangement) have a positive correlation with students' confidence in expressing their opinions. This finding aligns with the learning space design concept, which states that the physical school environment is a "third teacher" for students (Hod, 2017; Ismail & Zulkurnain, 2019). At MTs As'adiyah Cabenge, flexible seating breaks down the rigid hierarchy between teacher and student that has traditionally characterized conventional madrasah education.

This change in seating position is not merely aesthetic; it is a strategy to increase visual and auditory engagement. In the context of joyful learning, a dynamic classroom can reduce learning fatigue (Affandi et al., 2024; Ricita et al., 2025). Qualitative data supports this, as students feel more valued when they can interact face-to-face with their peers and teachers without the backs of their peers in front of them.

Affection-Based Classroom Management: A Humanistic Approach in Madrasah

One crucial finding of this study is the effectiveness of teachers' personalistic approaches and use of humor. This is a form of social-emotional learning (SEL) integrated into classroom management (Dumitrescu, 2023; Espelage et al., 2022). At the Madrasah Tsanawiyah (Islamic junior high school) level, where students are in their early adolescence, the need for validation and empathy is particularly high. Teachers' strategies of beginning class by asking students how they feel or incorporating icebreakers have been shown to activate the brain's limbic system, which is responsible for feelings of pleasure and motivation.

Theoretically, this strategy supports the concept of "flow" in learning, where students become immersed in learning activities because they feel challenged and happy (Bodea & Trofimovich, 2024; Mandhana & Caruso, 2023). The integration of humor into madrasah learning also demonstrates a pedagogical evolution, where religious values are maintained but conveyed through a more fluid and joyful medium, rather than through threats or authoritarianism.

Overall, classroom management at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge successfully creates a joyful learning environment through three main strategies: flexible spatial planning, empathetic communication, and the integration of recreational elements into learning. This success was driven by a small sample size, which allowed for optimal personalization of education.

This research provides a new contribution to the literature on classroom management in religious schools. While previous research often emphasized discipline and obedience, the results of this study offer a new paradigm that discipline can be born from the joy of learning. The Joyful Learning strategy at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge proves that a fun environment does not diminish academic seriousness; on the contrary, a relaxed atmosphere enhances students' mental readiness to face difficult material.

The practical implications of this research suggest that madrasah teachers need to be equipped with classroom management skills that go beyond instructional techniques, namely emotional management skills and creative learning environment design. The model implemented in grades 9.1 and 9.2 can serve as a prototype for other madrasahs with small class sizes to maximize the potential of each individual student.

4. CONCLUSION

The classroom management strategies implemented at MTs As'adiyah Cabenge significantly created a joyful learning environment. The implementation of classroom management through flexible layouts (U-formation and groups), an empathetic communication approach, and the integration of icebreakers proved effective in increasing student comfort and engagement. The limited number of students in Grades 9.1 (15 students) and 9.2 (13 students) was a key catalyst for teachers implementing personalized classroom management. This was confirmed by the average student perception score, which fell in the Very High category (4.34). This research demonstrates that in a madrasah environment, discipline does not have to be built through authoritarianism but can be achieved through a warm and humanistic learning atmosphere without compromising the essence of academic achievement.

As a recommendation, teachers are expected to consistently maintain variety in classroom management. The use of humor and interactive media needs to be developed more creatively to maintain the rhythm of Joyful Learning, especially during critical lesson hours (afternoon). Schools are advised to provide policy support in the form of providing flexible supporting facilities (such as easily movable classroom furniture) and facilitating regular training for teachers on modern classroom management techniques and adolescent psychology. Given that this study was limited to a small sample at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level, future researchers are advised to conduct comparative studies with public schools or madrasahs with large class populations. Furthermore, examining the long-term impact of the Joyful Learning strategy on cognitive learning outcomes (exam scores) more specifically using pure experimental analysis.

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