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DEVELOPING CHILD PROTECTION IN A NEWLY ESTABLISHED ISLAMIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: INSTITUTIONAL POLICY, ISLAMIC PEDAGOGY, AND CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT
Child protection is increasingly embedded in school regulations, yet how it develops in newly established Islamic schools remains insufficiently understood. This study examines institutional policy, Islamic pedagogical practices, and children's perspectives at SD Islam Az-Zikri, Bone Regency, Indonesia. A qualitative single-case study drew on semi-structured interviews with four school staff, a vignette-based focus group with five students aged 7–8, and school-document analysis. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was informed by Policy Enactment Theory, maqāṣid al-sharīʿah (ḥifẓ al-nafs and ḥifẓ al-ʿaql), and the New Sociology of Childhood. Findings show that protection developed incrementally as institutional capacity and material conditions shaped collective decisions, supervision, reporting, conflict response, escalation, and dignity-centered teacher–student relationships. Islamic values informed harm prevention, self-regulation, acknowledging and repairing wrongdoing, peer responsibility, and help-seeking. Children recognized harmful treatment, recalled school norms, expressed intentions to help peers, and identified sources of help. Together, these perspectives show how institutional priorities translate into Islamic pedagogical responses and how children interpret them through protective norms and help-seeking pathways.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most fundamental rights of every child is the right to be protected from all forms of violence. The Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that states are obligated to protect children from all forms of physical and psychological violence, a commitment further reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal 16.2, which targets the elimination of all forms of violence against children. In Indonesia, this commitment is reflected in various regulations and legal instruments that explicitly address this issue. Article 28B(2) of the 1945 Constitution serves as the highest constitutional basis, guaranteeing every child the right to survival, growth, and development, as well as protection from violence and discrimination. Law No. 35 of 2014, which amended Law No. 23 of 2002 on Child Protection, serves as the principal legal framework defining children's rights, the obligations of the state and society, and criminal sanctions for perpetrators of physical and psychological violence, neglect, and sexual crimes against children. Law No. 17/2016 strengthens penalties for child sexual violence, including the death penalty and chemical castration, supported by various national policies such as Child-Friendly Districts, ministerial service regulations, and child marriage prevention strategies. This comprehensive framework is further unified by Presidential Regulation No. 101/2022 (Stranas PKTA), providing a strategic blueprint for central and local governments to eliminate violence against children across all environments systematically.

However, the strength of regulations and policy implementation has not yet fully matched the realities encountered in the field. Data compiled through *Sistem Informasi Online Perlindungan Perempuan dan Anak* (SIMFONI PPA) show a consistent increase in reported cases, from 14,446 in 2021 to 19,628 in 2024 (Kementerian PPPA, 2025). In addition, National survey data indicate that approximately one in two children aged 13–17 years in Indonesia (50.78%) have experienced at least one form of violence during their lives. This finding suggests that the actual prevalence of violence is likely considerably higher than the number of officially recorded cases (Kementerian PPPA, 2024). The 2022 National Assessment found that 34.51% of students, or approximately one in three children, were potentially exposed to sexual violence, 36.31% were potentially exposed to bullying, and 26.9% were potentially exposed to physical punishment

in educational settings (Zamjani, 2023). The situation is further illustrated by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), which describes violence in school settings as an iceberg phenomenon, with reported cases remaining far below the number of cases actually occurring (Winriadirahman et al., 2025). Schools, which are expected to provide children with a welcoming, safe, and comfortable environment for education, have instead become one of the settings in which children may experience traumatic events. These concerns led to the issuance of Minister of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Regulation No. 46 of 2023 on the Prevention and Handling of Violence in Educational Settings, which required schools to establish a Violence Prevention and Response Team (TPPK). The regulation was subsequently repealed by Minister of Primary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 6 of 2026 on Safe and Comfortable School Culture, under which responsibility for creating a safe and comfortable school environment is placed on school leadership with the involvement of the wider school community. This shift is particularly relevant to newly established schools, where school-level protection arrangements and institutional capacities are still developing. In organizational studies, this condition is known as liability of newness, referring to the structural condition of newly formed organizations that have yet to develop established work routines, legitimacy networks, and institutional experience typically possessed by organizations with longer histories (Stinchcombe, 1965).

Bone Regency, one of the regencies in South Sulawesi Province, continues to face serious challenges related to violence against children. Research by Arohmi et al. (2024) reveals that cases of child sexual violence in Bone Regency remain persistently high with no significant annual decline. Addressing this urgent local crisis requires close attention to the spaces where children spend their formative years. Because schools are a primary part of a child's daily life, they are a crucial setting for examining how safety and protection are constructed and enacted.

This question is particularly relevant in newly established schools, where rules, organizational routines, relationships among actors, and protection practices are still taking shape, making their development more readily observable. SD Islam Az-Zikri in Bone Regency provides a relevant case. Operating under the Andi Mappamadeng Mattiro Deceng Foundation since

2025, the school had two cohorts, 11 teaching staff, and 105 students at the time of the study. The formation of child-protection arrangements in such a school has received limited direct scholarly attention.

Studies of child protection in Indonesian elementary schools have examined institutional implementation and responsibility through different approaches. Hermawansyah et al. (2025) examined four elementary schools in Makassar and found that limited facilities and the absence of case management teams constrained policy effectiveness. Nasution and Matondang (2026), using a fiqh siyasah analysis of Article 54 of Law No. 35 of 2014, identified weaknesses in oversight and interinstitutional coordination. Putri et al. (2026), applying the Edwards III framework to the TPPK policy, likewise identified continuing implementation challenges across Indonesian elementary schools. Taken together, these studies offer important diagnoses of implementation barriers but less insight into how school-level protection arrangements are initially shaped in newly established schools.

Policy Enactment Theory offers a perspective for examining this process. Rather than treating policy as a fixed text applied linearly, it views policy as continually interpreted and translated by school actors in response to local contexts, professional cultures, available resources, and external pressures (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2010, 2011). This perspective highlights how institutional actors set priorities and develop routines when arrangements are still emerging. It informs RQ1, which examines how the director and principal interpret and shape child protection during the school's early development.

Research applying maqāṣid al-sharīʿah to child protection has largely taken a normative or library-based approach. Examples include studies on child workers' rights (Yusefri et al., 2024), children's rights in Islamic law and international instruments (Dzhabara et al., 2025), and bullying prevention in pesantren (Hasan et al., 2026). Empirical applications remain limited. Adrian et al. (2024), for example, examined counseling services for bullying cases in a madrasah aliyah through maqāṣid principles, including ḥifẓ al-nafs, ḥifẓ al-ʿaql, ḥifẓ al-nasl, ḥifẓ al-ʿird, and tahqiq al-maslahah. This body of work has not sufficiently addressed how Islamic Religious Education and classroom teachers translate Islamic values into everyday child-protection practices in newly established elementary schools.

Examining such practices requires understanding ḥifẓ al-ʿaql beyond preventing harm to intellectual capacity, to include the development of children's intellectual and moral capacities. Auda's (2008) systems approach supports this developmental orientation (tanmiyah) within maqāṣid al-sharīʿah. Ḥifẓ al-nafs offers a complementary focus on physical safety and protection from harm. Together, these principles provide a lens for examining how advice, stories, habituation, guidance, and conflict management can protect children while developing their capacity to understand, regulate, and respond to situations affecting themselves and others. This combined perspective informs RQ2.

A third gap concerns the limited inclusion of children's own voices as primary data. Studies of school-based child protection, including Sandi and Parassa (2026) and Muzdalifah and Wulandari (2024), have relied mainly on adult informants, institutional actors, or legal texts. Consequently, children's own accounts of what makes them feel safe and protected remain less visible. This gap is also methodological. In a systematic review of 58 studies on the voices of children aged 3–6 in early childhood education, Sun et al. (2023) identified ongoing challenges in supporting children's agency, securing ongoing assent, and addressing power inequalities between children and researchers.

The New Sociology of Childhood, developed by James and Prout (2003), challenges adult-centred accounts by positioning children as competent social actors who interpret and navigate their own social worlds. This perspective informs RQ3 by treating children as interpreters of harmful behavior, protection norms, and sources of help, explored through an age-appropriate vignette-based FGD.

Building on these three gaps, this study addresses three research questions: First, how do the director and principal interpret and enact child protection policies during the early establishment of SD Islam Az-Zikri? Second, how do religious and classroom teachers integrate the principles of *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* and ḥifẓ al-nafs within the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* framework into everyday child-protection practices? Third, how do students make sense of harmful behavior, protection norms, and sources of help within the school environment?

This article argues that child protection in a newly established Islamic school develops through three connected processes: the formation of institutional arrangements, teachers' translation of institutional priorities and

Islamic values into everyday practices, and children's interpretations of harm, protection norms, and help-seeking. These processes are distinct but interdependent: institutional capacity shapes what can be organized, pedagogical practice shapes how protection is enacted, and children's perspectives illuminate how protective norms and routes to help are understood.

The study's theoretical contribution lies not simply in combining three frameworks, but in using them to examine connected aspects of child protection. Policy Enactment Theory explains how institutional capacity and school actors shape emerging arrangements; maqāṣid al-sharīʿah shows how ḥifẓ al-nafs and ḥifẓ al-ʿaql connect the protection of children's well-being with the cultivation of moral reasoning and self-regulation through everyday teaching; and the New Sociology of Childhood foregrounds how children interpret harm, norms, and help-seeking. Read together, these perspectives link policy formation, Islamic pedagogical translation, and children's perspectives, allowing the analysis to identify where institutional intentions and children's access to support may converge or diverge. Methodologically, the study includes the perspectives of children aged 7–8 through a vignette-based FGD, an approach relatively uncommon in child protection research in Indonesian Islamic educational settings. Practically, it offers context-specific insights for newly established Islamic schools developing child-protection systems under national mandates.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design at SD Islam Az-Zikri, Bone Regency, Indonesia. This design was selected because the study seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of how child protection is interpreted and practiced by different actors within a single institutional unit, rather than to generalize statistically across schools (Yin, 2017). Participants were purposively selected based on their institutional roles and relevance to the research questions (Patton, 2002). Four adult participants—the school director, principal, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher, and classroom teacher—were interviewed individually on one occasion each. Five students aged 7–8 years (two boys and three girls) were also selected based on their classroom teacher's recommendations and willingness to participate, subject to parental consent and their own assent.

Data were collected through three techniques: semi-structured interviews with the four categories of adult informants; vignette-based FGD, which is recommended in research involving children because it reduces the pressure to disclose personal experiences while still capturing how children directly interpret social situations (Barter & Renold, 1999; Sun et al., 2023), and analysis of school regulations and vision and mission documents (Bowen, 2009). The FGD involved all five students, lasted approximately 20 minutes, and was conducted in the school's meeting room. The facilitator read aloud a hypothetical scenario about a child named Rafi experiencing mistreatment by peers, accompanied by an illustration. Participants were invited to discuss the situation, its emotional consequences, appropriate responses, and potential sources of help. Their homeroom teacher was present solely to provide comfort without intervening in the discussion. The researcher audio-recorded the session using a mobile phone and transcribed it personally. School regulations and vision and mission documents were also examined. All interviews and the FGD were conducted in Indonesian in August 2026. Transcripts were analyzed in their original language, while selected quotations were translated into English for the manuscript.

The study obtained institutional permission from SD Islam Az-Zikri and the director of its foundation, alongside oral consent from participating children's parents or guardians, and followed a layered consent procedure based on guidelines for research with children (Graham et al., 2013). Formal approval from a research ethics committee was not obtained. Children received age-appropriate explanations of the study and provided verbal assent, with participation remaining voluntary and withdrawal permitted at any time. Participants' identities were anonymized in the transcripts, and access to audio recordings was restricted to the researcher. Any spontaneous disclosure of violence would not be used as research data and would instead be referred through the school's child-protection mechanism. No such disclosure occurred during the FGD.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis was primarily deductive, with the three theoretical frameworks guiding the initial coding categories. Interview data from the school director and principal, together

with school documents, were analyzed through Policy Enactment Theory; teacher interviews were examined through ḥifẓ al-nafs and ḥifẓ al-ʿaql within maqāṣid al-sharīʿah; and children's FGD data were analyzed through the New Sociology of Childhood. Relevant data segments were coded and grouped into broader themes, which were subsequently reviewed against the transcripts and documentary evidence. The researcher conducted all coding and made the final decisions regarding theme development and interpretation.

Trustworthiness was supported through data triangulation, comparison across informants, repeated transcript review, analytical notes, and discussions of emerging interpretations with a colleague. The researcher had no prior institutional affiliation with the school and entered the setting specifically to conduct this study.

The researcher used generative AI tools (Claude, Perplexity, and ChatGPT) selectively for literature discovery, language refinement, and suggestions for possible codes and thematic groupings. The researcher retained control of all coding decisions, theme development, and interpretations, and subject them to human oversight. The researchers retain full responsibility for the research design, analysis, and final manuscript.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How do the director and principal interpret and enact child protection policies during the early establishment of the school?

a. Building a Child Protection System Gradually and Contextually

The data show that child protection at SD Islam Az-Zikri has been developed gradually since the school was first conceived. The director explained that from the outset, the school was oriented toward *"creating the best environment for children,"* which was translated into several practical decisions, including efforts to provide low-risk play facilities, verify the identities of individuals picking up students, and maintain appropriate supervision ratios so that children remain in a comfortable and monitored environment. At the document level, this orientation is also reflected in school regulations governing permission to leave school, student pick-up arrangements, restrictions on leaving school alone, health, and active parental involvement. Child protection

has therefore been an institutional consideration since the early phase, while its formal arrangements continue to be evaluated and developed gradually.

This pattern corresponds to the central premise of Ball's (2012) Policy Enactment Theory, which holds that policy does not move linearly from text to implementation. Policy enters school contexts shaped by particular histories, resources, capacities, professional cultures, and material conditions, and is subsequently interpreted and translated by school actors. Braun et al. (2011) further emphasize that characteristics such as staffing, budgets, facilities, institutional history, school ethos, and the external environment may either support or constrain the process of policy enactment in schools.

The findings from SD Islam Az-Zikri illustrate this process clearly. The director stated that rules were developed neither simultaneously nor comprehensively, describing the process as *"by process and by need."* He explained that the school considers what is most needed, what can realistically be done, the budgetary consequences involved, and which needs should receive priority. Plans that are not yet considered urgent are retained, while their implementation may be postponed until school conditions allow. This indicates that material constraints function as part of the process through which policy is shaped. These constraints influence the content of policy as well as the order in which priorities are established. This finding is consistent with Bradbury et al. (2023), who examined policy enactment in elementary schools during the pandemic. They showed that school leaders' decisions were strongly influenced by local needs, material conditions within schools, and principals' professional judgments. In Az-Zikri, however, comparable adaptation arises not from an external disruption but from the early growth phase of the institution and the need to determine what can realistically be established first and what is most relevant to local contexts and needs.

The school's relatively recent establishment further clarifies this condition. The director explicitly linked some of the school's limitations to its institutional age, particularly in relation to the limited availability of professional staff and the need for teachers with specialized expertise, such as school counselors. He stated, *"We indeed lack professional teachers. So we still need teachers with specific expertise. We need guidance and counseling teachers, particularly for the early childhood or elementary level."* In response, the school has begun

developing collaborations with educational consultants, psychologists, and therapists in an effort to create a more inclusive and safe environment. Stinchcombe (1965) described this condition through the concept of liability of newness, showing that newly established organizations face limitations in developing routines, legitimacy, capacity, and resources that are generally more readily available in established organizations. Research by Andersson and Henrekson (2026) on organizations involved in establishing schools also shows that new schools face challenges in gaining legitimacy from various stakeholders and meeting the regulatory and institutional requirements necessary for sustainable operation.

In the case of Az-Zikri, these conditions appear as a capacity-building process occurring alongside policy development. The school does not yet possess all of the capacities considered ideal. At the same time, it has begun identifying these gaps, prioritizing needs, selecting teachers, developing external professional support, and providing character development through regular weekly *tarbiyah* sessions. These findings show that in the school's early stages, child protection is being enacted alongside the development of the conditions needed to implement it more consistently and sustainably in the future. The mechanisms formalized to date, discussed below, are largely procedural and spatial, whereas functions that depend on specialist expertise, such as counseling, remain under development. Constraints thus appear to shape not only the pace of enactment but also its composition.

This process is also collective. The director explained that developing standard operating procedures and regulations involves the foundation, school leadership, unit heads, and senior teachers with field experience. This aligns with Policy Enactment Theory, which views school actors as active translators of policy. Skerritt et al. (2023), for example, show how middle leaders function as policy translators who transform policy ideas into concrete actions and organize them as collective work within schools. In this study, the process is evident in the involvement of the foundation structure and unit heads from the stage of developing school regulations. Child protection policy consequently emerges through distributive institutional work, even though formal authority remains located within the foundation structure.

b. Translating Child Protection into Prevention and Response Mechanisms

Several mechanisms have been formalized in the school regulations. Student pick-up is restricted to registered parents or guardians, any change in the person picking up a child must be confirmed with the classroom teacher, students are prohibited from leaving school on their own, and repeated violations may be discussed with parents. At the same time, the director described efforts to monitor school spaces, eliminate blind spots, and ensure teacher supervision when children play. He stated, *"We must make sure there are no blind spots, meaning points where we cannot supervise the children. That is why we designed it so that everything is accessible, including teacher supervision when the children are playing."*

As the informants described and the regulations reflect, these mechanisms show that child protection at the school level is highly concrete. Protection is expressed through arrangements concerning who may take a child home, whom to contact when a problem arises, how play areas are supervised, and to whom concerns should be escalated. The enactment process goes beyond formal procedures. The principal explained that when a conflict occurs, both parties are allowed to explain what happened. Teachers then seek the root of the problem and conduct *tabayyun* before deciding. The director similarly explained that children who make mistakes are not humiliated in front of their peers and are instead invited to discuss the situation in order to understand the reasons behind their actions. He stated, *"When a child makes a mistake, we do not humiliate them in front of their friends. The classroom teacher or the teacher who witnessed the mistake is called in, and we talk things through calmly. Then we ask why the child did it or what the reason was."*

Understanding the relationship between policy text and policy application is therefore important. School regulations may establish formal procedures, while the procedures themselves do not fully explain how school actors understand the purposes underlying them. The enactment perspective helps explain why a particular rule may take a particular form in a local context. Ball et al. (2012) emphasize that policy becomes practice through actors' interpretations and their interactions with school contexts. In this study, formal child protection procedures take meaning through how the school handles

conflict, particularly by listening to children's explanations before deciding on a response.

The response mechanism also reveals a relatively clear escalation structure. The director explained that problems are generally addressed first at the classroom level through the classroom teacher. When the classroom teacher cannot resolve the issue, it is referred to the principal. The principal provided a similar account, positioning the classroom teacher as the first point of contact when a child encounters a problem. This structure is significant because it places child protection close to children's everyday lives. Initial resolution is handled by the actor closest to the interactional setting. At the same time, higher-level authority serves as an escalation point when an issue exceeds classroom-level capacity. The data describe this structure but do not show how consistently it operates.

c. Relationships, Dignity, and Attention to Children as the Foundation of Protection

The data also show that child protection at Az-Zikri takes a strong form through interpersonal relationships. The director considers teacher-student relationships among the most important aspects to preserve as the school develops. He emphasized the importance of teachers knowing students personally and even using children's names when addressing them. In his view, when the emotional connection between teachers and students weakens, the school risks losing important aspects of children's lives. The principal similarly explained that forms of address such as *"Ananda"* and the use of students' names are understood as ways of creating a comfortable, dignified, and conducive environment. The director stated, *"That is why, when this bonding is no longer visible, the school will most likely lose many things, especially once teachers are no longer properly connected with their students."*

This finding is consistent with the growing body of research on teacher-student relationships and their association with children's safety and well-being. A meta-analysis by Bokkel et al. (2023), covering 65 primary studies and more than 185,000 students, found that higher-quality teacher-student relationships were associated with lower levels of bullying and peer victimization. A systematic

review of 24 studies by García-Rodríguez et al. (2023) also showed that teachers can function as attachment figures and secure bases for elementary school students, while the quality of teacher-student relationships is closely associated with externalizing and internalizing behaviors, school liking, peer acceptance, academic achievement, self-concept, and emotional regulation among children. This was further supported by Di Lisio et al. (2025), who found that positive teacher-child relationships were associated with improved academic achievement.

The Az-Zikri data extend this understanding to the institutional level. Previous research has largely demonstrated that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with child protection and well-being outcomes. The present findings suggest how these relationships are deliberately and structurally facilitated through organizational arrangements. The relatively low student-to-teacher ratio allows for more intensive teacher-student interaction and creates greater opportunities for teachers to know their students more closely. Protective relationships therefore depend partly on interpersonal qualities and are also shaped by whether the school structure enables such relationships to emerge and be sustained. The director's concern with preserving these relationships as the school develops suggests an awareness that this strength is tied to current organizational conditions. This qualifies the emphasis on constraint earlier in this section: conditions that limit protection in some respects (e.g., specialist staffing) may enable it in others (e.g., relational closeness).

This relational dimension also reveals the value orientation through which the school understands protection. The director referred to *ta'awun* and *rahmah* as foundations for treating children, while the approach to misconduct emphasizes separating problematic behavior from the child's identity. The principal echoed this view, stating that the behavior is problematic, not the child. Consistency between the two informants suggests that this approach has become part of a shared understanding at the school leadership level. In enactment terms, such values shape the school ethos through which regulations are interpreted (Braun et al., 2011), and they anticipate the maqāṣid-based reading of teachers' practices in RQ2, where the same distinction between behavior and child reappears.

The three patterns identified in RQ1 therefore reveal an interconnected process. The school develops its system gradually by adapting policy to its needs, capacities, and material conditions. The system is then translated into mechanisms of supervision, reporting, response, and escalation. At the same time, these mechanisms depend substantially on relationships that enable teachers to know children, listen to them, and respond to problems while preserving their dignity. These findings suggest that in a developing school, child protection unfolds as an ongoing process of institutional enactment in which rules, capacities, mechanisms, and professional culture develop simultaneously. Because these arrangements are reported primarily from leadership perspectives and school documents, RQ2 and RQ3 are needed to examine how teachers translate them and how children receive them.

How do the religious teacher and classroom teacher integrate the principles of *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* and *ḥifẓ al-nafs* within the maqāṣid al-sharīʿah framework into everyday pedagogical practices of child protection?

a. Translating Islamic Values into Everyday Child Protection Practices

The findings show that Islamic values at SD Islam Az-Zikri extend beyond transmitting religious knowledge through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and are translated into how teachers guide children in everyday situations. The PAI teacher explained that the school's specialized curriculum allows relevant verses, hadiths, and religious advice to be incorporated into classroom instruction. One principle explicitly brought into practice is the idea of making goodness *"a shared responsibility." "Make goodness a shared responsibility. And this is certainly related to how we behave and treat our friends, so that we can look after and protect one another."* (PAI Teacher)

This principle is then applied in concrete situations, such as when a student disturbs a classmate or commits a wrongdoing. The child who has done something wrong is encouraged to acknowledge the action, seek forgiveness from Allah through *istighfar*, and apologize. In contrast, classmates are encouraged to reprimand and report inappropriate behavior when they encounter it. This pattern shows that Islamic values integrate through a process of translation. As with the regulations discussed in RQ1, this translation is interpretive work

carried out by school actors, although here the source being interpreted is religious teaching rather than formal policy. Religious values become relevant when they provide children with a framework for understanding what has happened and what should be done afterward. For example, the prohibition against disturbing classmates is explained through the concepts of *zulm* and sin. The PAI teacher explained, *"Usually, when I tell the children not to disturb their friends, I use the hadith about not committing injustice [zulm]..."*

Similarly, the prohibition against retaliating against harmful treatment is accompanied by teachings on controlling anger and seeking help from teachers. Religious education therefore provides more than normative instruction. It also provides a moral language that children can use when they encounter concrete social problems.

This finding aligns with Mufti et al. (2024), who showed that PAI teachers in elementary schools can contribute to bullying prevention by integrating Islamic learning, ethical and moral development, positive classroom interactions, and collaboration with other school actors. Their study also indicates that limited teacher resources, family involvement, facilities, and knowledge of child psychology can affect prevention efforts. Az-Zikri's findings reinforce this direction by offering a more micro-level account of how these values are operationalized, while the staffing limits described in RQ1 parallel the resource limitations their study identifies. The prohibition against harming others is translated into a concrete sequence of responses, beginning with acknowledgment of wrongdoing and followed by apology and reporting. A similar pattern was identified in Ulum et al. (2026), who studied three elementary schools in Indonesia. Their research showed that bullying prevention through Islamic education works through curriculum integration, habituating Islamic values within the school environment, and teacher mediation.

"...if a friend does something wrong to us, disturbs us, mocks us, bullies us, and so on, we should not immediately respond with the same kind of action..." (PAI Teacher)

"...control your anger, and immediately tell the Ustadz or Ustadzah..." (PAI Teacher)

Reading these practices through *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* helps explain their developmental dimension. In Auda's (2008) systems approach, *maqāṣid* extends beyond preserving something from harm and is also oriented toward the development of human reasoning capacities. Accordingly, *this study uses ḥifẓ al-ʿaql to examine how religious education gives children opportunities* to understand situations, consider the consequences of their actions, and develop more controlled responses. The available evidence does not provide sufficient grounds to claim that each of these practices directly constitutes Auda's formulation of *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql*. More appropriately, these practices can be understood as consistent with the developmental orientation Auda proposes for advancing *maqāṣid*.

The prohibition against harming others and retaliating against wrongdoing discussed above is also substantively related to *ḥifẓ al-nafs*. While *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* explains how children's capacity to understand and consider their actions is developed, *ḥifẓ al-nafs* explains what is substantively being protected through this overall process, namely the child's body and safety, both as a potential perpetrator and as a potential victim of harm. The scope of *ḥifẓ al-nafs* in contemporary scholarship, as Bawono et al. (2025) emphasize, extends beyond physical safety and also encompasses psychological, social, and emotional well-being. This broader scope is clearly relevant to the data from SD Islam Az-Zikri, since the prohibition against *zulm* and retaliation is intended to prevent potential emotional harm alongside physical injury.

An important feature of the findings is the consistency of this orientation across different school actors. The PAI teacher stated that *"what we should hate is the behavior, the wrong action, not the person."* In the interview with the principal, an almost identical principle emerged: *"the problem is the behavior, not the child."* The recurrence of this pattern among actors in different professional positions indicates that this approach has a broader place within the school's orientation. It also extends to the teacher level, the alignment between the director and principal noted in RQ1. This convergence does not provide sufficient grounds to claim that all members of the school community hold the same principle. Yet, it does indicate normative alignment across roles in how children's behavioral problems are understood.

b. Guiding Children from Conflict toward Self-Control and Repair

The integration of Islamic values is also evident in efforts to guide children in regulating their responses when facing conflict. The PAI teacher explained the use of the hadith *"la taghdab, wa lakal jannah"* to help children manage anger. Children are encouraged to avoid responding to disturbances with similar behavior and are instead taught to control their anger and communicate the problem to a teacher. In cases of wrongdoing, the teacher also follows a clear sequence: acknowledging the mistake, performing *istighfar*, and then apologizing to the affected friend. *"First, acknowledge the mistake, then perform istighfar and apologize to the friend who felt disturbed."* (PAI Teacher)

This practice is important when understood through *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* because it suggests how religious education is directed toward children's ability to regulate responses and consider possible courses of action. The hadith does not function solely as memorized material. It is invoked when children encounter situations requiring self-control. Religious knowledge is thereby connected to decision-making in everyday social life.

The protective function of anger regulation can also be understood through *ḥifẓ al-nafs*, where the two analytical lenses converge most clearly across the RQ2 data. Poorly regulated anger can lead to physical violence between children. Teachings prohibiting anger, though operating through the development of children's cognitive and emotional capacities, also aim to protect life and well-being by reducing the risk of physical and emotional harm to both the angry child and the child who may become the target of that anger. The two lenses therefore illuminate two dimensions of the same practice: ḥifẓ al-ʿaql addresses the mechanism through which the capacity is developed, and ḥifẓ al-nafs addresses the substantive protective objective.

The classroom teacher describes a similar approach through more dialogical pedagogical strategies. When a disagreement occurs because children bump into one another, she does not immediately determine who is at fault. Instead, she asks why they collided, invites the children to consider how the incident could be prevented, and guides them until they recognize for themselves the importance of walking carefully and queuing. In another conflict-resolution situation, she explained that she listens to both sides and then goes to the scene

before concluding. *"I listen to both sides, then I go to the scene."* (Classroom Teacher)

This practice resembles the principles of restorative practice, an alternative approach to supporting behavior that focuses on repairing harm, promoting accountability and responsibility, and restoring relationships among individuals within the school community (Kehoe et al., 2017; Lodi et al., 2022; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). However, the present study does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that Az-Zikri formally implements a restorative practice model. The term was not used by the informants and was not a focus of the study. What can be stated is that several practices identified in the data have substantive similarities with restorative approaches. At Az-Zikri, these processes emerge through the school's own Islamic value framework and pedagogical practices.

The combination of *istighfar* and apology also shows that the repair process takes place in two domains simultaneously. *Istighfar* connects wrongdoing to the child's moral relationship with Allah, while an apology addresses restoring the relationship with the affected peer. This gives the developmental process described at Az-Zikri a distinctive character. Repair is framed as resolving interpersonal conflict and correcting the child's moral responsibility. Viewed through *ḥifẓ al-nafs*, it also helps restore the relationships that support children's sense of safety over the longer term.

This finding extends the work of Mufti et al. (2024) and Ulum et al. (2026) by showing that the integration of Islamic values extends beyond instructional content, habituation, or the general role of teachers. It also becomes part of the sequence of actions used to address particular conflicts. The practices described by teachers thus organize responses to wrongdoing around acknowledgment, repair, and moral responsibility.

The data also show that these capacities remain in development, with some areas still needing improvement. The PAI teacher acknowledged that children's self-control still needs to be strengthened. He also recognized that children may deliberately repeat wrongdoing because they know the corrective process can still be completed. *"Sometimes they deliberately do something wrong because they know the mistake can be corrected."* (PAI Teacher)

This admission matters because it shows that the internalization of values cannot be inferred simply from the existence of rules or religious routines (a caution that also applies to the formal procedures described in RQ1 and to the children's stated norms in RQ3). Children remain in the process of learning to regulate themselves, understand consequences, and develop habits.

The developmental reading of *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* is particularly relevant here. Capacity development is an ongoing process, so inconsistent behavior does not by itself indicate a failure of the values being taught. At the same time, the finding points to a tension between allowing space for children to correct mistakes and establishing sufficiently clear consequences to encourage discipline and responsibility. From the perspective of *ḥifẓ al-nafs*, this tension is also a matter of protection. As long as children's self-control remains underdeveloped, risks to their peers' physical safety may remain present. The development of children's internal capacities and the active protection of other children's safety therefore need to proceed together and reinforce one another.

c. Protection as a Shared and Relational Responsibility

The PAI teacher also explained that children are encouraged to actively protect themselves, observe their peers' behavior, and report inappropriate actions when they witness them. At the same time, they are instructed not to intervene independently. *"...whoever sees their friend doing something wrong... please report it to anyone here. And do not take action on your own."* (PAI Teacher)

Through this pattern, responsibility for protection is distributed beyond teachers alone. Children are given a role in recognizing problems and initiating help, while formal intervention remains the responsibility of adults. Read alongside the New Sociology of Childhood, this arrangement gives children a participatory role within limits set by adults; how children themselves understand that role is taken up in RQ3.

This pattern is related to the literature on bystanders and peer involvement in bullying. Salmivalli (2014) explains that bullying is a group process, meaning that peer responses can reinforce or inhibit the continuation of such behavior. Az-Zikri's findings describe a more limited form of peer involvement, adapted to an elementary school context. Children are not encouraged to confront the child involved in problematic behavior directly. Instead, they are encouraged to assess

the situation, assist their peers within their capacities, and report the incident to adults—this division of roles positions children as active agents while limiting their exposure to new risks.

This orientation is also evident in the classroom teacher's practice of encouraging children to think before acting. Rather than immediately providing an answer, she asks questions about what caused an incident and how it might be prevented. *"I ask first, 'Why are you crying, my friend?' … Then I ask again, 'Is there a way we can avoid bumping into each other?'"* (Classroom Teacher)

From the perspective of *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql*, this practice matters because the teacher's questions direct children's reasoning toward preventing recurrence, not only resolving the incident at hand. The relational dimension reappears in the classroom teacher's approach to conflict. As noted above, she listens to both sides, considers witness accounts, and seeks to understand what happened before determining a response.

This practice overlaps with the dialogical emphasis identified by Zulkarnain et al. (2026), particularly their discussion of empathetic communication and personal advice as means of internalizing Islamic values. The similarity suggests that relationships and communication may constitute one pathway connecting moral teachings with everyday child protection practices.

The data also reveal limitations within this system. The PAI teacher described instances in which children became disappointed when reports about being disturbed by peers did not receive an immediate response because the teacher was occupied. In response, children were directed to come to the office when the teacher they normally approached could not give them sufficient attention.

"…there were one or two children who became disappointed when, for example, they reported that a friend was bothering them, but the Ustadz or Ustadzah was not very responsive at that moment…" (PAI Teacher)

In addressing this issue, the PAI teacher emphasized:

"So at that time I told them that if they found a Ustadz or Ustadzah who happened to be busy, they should come to the office. Come to the office, and we will provide

a better and more proportionate response. That way, they will feel that things are fairer and that they are more comfortable. So, responsiveness is something that still needs to be continuously improved and given attention, so that children do not stop reporting because they are disappointed with our response." (PAI Teacher)

This suggests that encouraging children to seek help is insufficient unless their reports receive a responsive answer. It also qualifies the escalation structure described in RQ1: a formal route to higher authority is useful only when children can access it through an available adult.

Overall, the findings for RQ2 indicate that, in teachers' accounts, Islamic values at SD Islam Az-Zikri are translated into practice through teaching, habituation, dialogue, self-control, repair of wrongdoing, and help-seeking mechanisms. Reading these processes simultaneously through *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql* and *ḥifẓ al-nafs* positions them as two dimensions of a single protective process. This is an analytical reading, not a claim about how the teachers themselves conceptualize these practices. These teacher-level practices translate the institutional orientation described in RQ1 (dignity, relational closeness, and the separation of behavior from the child) into concrete response sequences such as acknowledgment, *istighfar*, apology, and reporting. The translation is nonetheless incomplete: the PAI teacher acknowledges that children's self-control is still developing, that some children may deliberately repeat wrongdoing because correction remains available. That responsiveness to children's reports needs continued improvement.

How do students make sense of harmful behavior, protection norms, and sources of help within the school environment?

a. Recognizing Harm and Its Emotional Consequences

During the FGD, the children were able to recognize that the treatment of Rafi in the hypothetical scenario was inappropriate. When asked to explain why, S2 responded, *"Because we definitely would not want to be treated that way, and because we should not treat other people that way,"* while S3 said, *"Because we have to keep being good friends."* The two responses reached a similar conclusion through different forms of reasoning. These data show that children do not

necessarily articulate norms uniformly when given the opportunity to explain their reasoning.

This finding is relevant to the New Sociology of Childhood, which views children as social actors capable of making meaning within their own social worlds. James and Prout (2003) position children's capacity to produce and interpret meaning as an important element of this perspective. In this study, the two responses do not provide sufficient grounds to conclude that all children employ the same pattern of reasoning. They do, however, show that children aged 7 to 8 can provide their own reasons when discussing how others should be treated. The children also identified several emotional consequences attributed to Rafi, including *"hurt feelings," "sad," "disappointed,"* and *"angry."* These data indicate that the participants were able to recognize multiple forms of emotional response. Peltola et al. (2023) provide empirical support for the capacity of children to understand and articulate issues within peer relationships through their own narratives. The findings from SD Islam Az-Zikri are compatible with a similar capacity, though in a more limited form, since children assessed a hypothetical situation rather than narrating their own experiences.

b. Shared Norms of Care and the Prohibition against Harm

The children also articulated what they considered appropriate responses when witnessing a friend being treated poorly. S2 and S3 said they would *"help,"* S1 would *"invite [Rafi] to play,"* and S4 would *"help Rafi."* Because the question was based on a hypothetical scenario, these responses are more appropriately understood as stated intentions than as evidence of actual behavior. The responses are also open to more than one reading: the data do not specify whether "help" refers to comforting Rafi, intervening directly, or reporting to an adult, which matters because the PAI teacher in RQ2 instructs children to report rather than intervene on their own.

This finding overlaps with the literature on bystander roles in bullying. As noted in RQ2, Salmivalli's (2014) group-process perspective treats peer responses as part of bullying dynamics. Pervez et al. (2026) also found that elementary school children can reflect on how they might respond to bullying and exclusion when presented with concrete scenarios. In the context of Az-Zikri,

the children expressed a verbal orientation toward helping and inclusion, although this study cannot establish whether such orientations are translated into everyday behavior. Another interesting expression of care was the response *"invite [him] to play."* Although offered by only one child (S1), this response may be read as shifting the meaning of protection from simply stopping harmful behavior toward efforts to restore the child's participation in social interaction. In elementary school contexts, this is relevant because participation in peer groups constitutes an important part of children's experiences at school.

Another component of this theme is the children's ability to recall school norms. When asked what their classroom teacher usually tells them, the children repeated prohibitions such as *"we must not bother our friends," "we must not make fun of our friends,"* and *"we must not hit our friends."* Here, the children are articulating norms that have previously been communicated to them by adults. The prohibition against bothering friends also parallels what the PAI teacher described telling children (RQ2), which suggests some continuity between the norms children recall from their classroom teacher and those articulated through religious instruction.

Corsaro's (1992) concept of interpretive reproduction helps illuminate how children interact with norms introduced by adults. Children are understood as participants who appropriate and rearticulate elements of their social worlds through everyday practice. In this study, the children's repetition of prohibitions against bothering, teasing, and hitting their friends can be read within the same framework. They rearticulate norms introduced by teachers through their own conversations. However, because the FGD data show convergent group responses, the findings are more appropriately interpreted as evidence that these norms are available within the children's social knowledge than as evidence that every child has individually internalized them.

c. Knowing Where to Seek Help

The help-seeking map that emerged from the FGD also shows that children place close social relationships within their access to protection. Teachers were the primary choice when the children imagined a situation occurring at school, with one student specifically referring to *"the teacher who is closest."* This choice suggests that, for children, sources of help are recognized according to their

formal position as well as their proximity and accessibility in everyday situations. Access to help therefore appears to depend on the extent to which an adult is present within the child's social environment and can be reached when a problem occurs. Protection is consequently understood through concrete and proximate relationships within the school environment.

This relational dimension is also reflected in the literature on disclosure of bullying experiences. Bjereld et al. (2024) found that children are more likely to disclose victimization experiences when they have positive relationships with teachers, while their experiences of how teachers respond to bullying also shape their willingness to disclose. In the context of Az-Zikri, the FGD data do not yet capture actual disclosure experiences. They do, however, show that children have an understanding of whom they can approach when they encounter or witness a problem. The phrase *"the teacher who is closest"* is therefore important as an indication of the accessibility of help within children's social worlds. The choice of peers and the principal when a teacher is perceived as unavailable also shows that children recognize more than one avenue for seeking help. Sources of protection are thus understood as part of a network of relationships available around them.

Overall, the three patterns identified in RQ3 show that the children participating in the FGD were able to recognize harmful treatment, provide simple reasons for their judgments, identify prosocial responses, recall school norms, and identify sources of help. Within the New Sociology of Childhood framework, children can therefore be understood as active participants in the social world of the school. The data also indicate important boundaries that should be maintained in interpreting these findings. The study cannot conclude that all of these norms have been deeply internalized, that children will always act according to their stated responses, or that the school has fully provided a safe and responsive experience of protection. The RQ3 findings are more appropriately understood as an account of how children interpret harm, care, and the possibility of seeking help within their school context.

Taken together, the three research questions operate at different but complementary levels rather than within a single unified framework. Policy Enactment Theory clarifies how protective arrangements take shape through capacity, material conditions, and actors' interpretations (RQ1). Maqāṣid al-

sharīʿah, through *ḥifẓ al-nafs* and *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql*, specifies the purposes invoked when teachers translate those arrangements into everyday practice: safeguarding children's physical and psychological safety while cultivating their capacity to understand, regulate, and repair (RQ2). The New Sociology of Childhood shifts the vantage point to the children, whose accounts show how harm, norms, and sources of help are interpreted from within their own social world (RQ3). The three levels interact rather than operate linearly. Institutional capacity shapes what the school can formalize (RQ1), while teachers translate these priorities into practices of restraint, dialogue, repair, and reporting (RQ2). Children, in turn, recognize harmful behavior, recall protective norms, express intentions to help peers, and identify accessible sources of support (RQ3). Together, these findings suggest that child protection depends on the interaction between organizational capacity, pedagogical practices, and children's understanding and access to support. Because the FGD used a hypothetical scenario, children's accounts indicate interpretations and stated intentions rather than actual behavior or the demonstrated effectiveness of protection arrangements.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how child protection is constructed and enacted in a newly established Islamic elementary school through three interconnected dimensions: institutional policy, everyday pedagogical practice, and children's perspectives. The findings show that protection at SD Islam Az-Zikri is developed gradually in response to the school's needs, resources, and institutional capacities. School leaders translate this emerging orientation into concrete mechanisms of prevention, reporting, response, and escalation, while relational practices that emphasize dignity, attentiveness, and teacher–student connection form an important foundation of protection.

The study's original contribution lies in showing how institutional arrangements, Islamic values in everyday pedagogy, and children's perspectives interact in shaping child protection. Through Policy Enactment Theory, it demonstrates how school actors interpret and shape protection arrangements in response to institutional capacities and local conditions. Through *ḥifẓ al-nafs* and *ḥifẓ al-ʿaql*, practices of harm prevention, self-regulation, repair, and help-

seeking connect protection with children's moral development. Children's responses further show how protection is interpreted through recognition of harm, recalled school norms, stated intentions to help peers, and identification of sources of help. Together, these findings show that protection depends not on formal arrangements or moral instruction alone, but on their translation into everyday practices that children can recognize and access.

Practically, the findings suggest that newly established Islamic schools should develop child protection alongside teacher capacity, responsive reporting systems, and relational school cultures. Given the single-case design and small participant group (four staff and five children), the findings are context-specific and cannot establish how consistently protection operates in practice. Future research should compare multiple schools, follow protection systems as they mature, and examine children's perspectives alongside actual help-seeking.

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