From Protection to Empowerment: An Islamic Ethical and Epistemological Framework for AI-Assisted Inclusive Education

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Abstract

Children with special needs are frequently supported through forms of care that prioritize protection, yet excessive assistance may restrict autonomy, decision-making, and participation. At the same time, artificial intelligence (AI) is creating new possibilities for accessible and personalized learning, including speech-to-text, text-to-speech, adaptive content, translation, and communication support. These possibilities also raise ethical and epistemological questions concerning privacy, bias, reliability, human agency, and the authority of knowledge. This article develops an Islamic ethical and epistemological framework for AI-assisted inclusive education, retaining the original concern with the transformation of care from protection to empowerment. It employs a qualitative conceptual-reflective design based on a critical reading of Islamic sources, inclusive-education policy, AI-ethics guidance, and selected scholarly literature, alongside the author's reflective notes on mentoring practices. The analysis identifies four connected principles: human dignity and justice; amanah and accountable data stewardship; epistemic responsibility and human mediation; and capability-oriented empowerment. It proposes that AI should function as an assistive and enabling resource rather than a substitute for children's agency, teachers' professional judgment, or family relationships. The article concludes that ethically governed AI can contribute to inclusive social transformation when accessibility, individualized support, meaningful participation, and human oversight are treated as non-negotiable conditions. The proposed framework is conceptual and requires empirical validation in diverse educational settings.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, inclusive education, Islamic ethics, children with special needs, empowerment

Introduction

Children with special needs have the same inherent dignity and right to develop their abilities, participate in education, and contribute to social life as other children. The Qur'anic affirmation that the children of Adam have been honoured (Q.S. al-Isra' [17]: 70) provides an ethical starting point for recognizing human worth without reducing a person to bodily, sensory, cognitive, or communication differences. In educational practice, this recognition requires more than benevolent attitudes. It requires accessible environments, reasonable accommodation, opportunities for decision-making, and support that enables each child to participate as fully as possible.

An important tension emerges in everyday care. Parents and educators may take over tasks, make decisions, or restrict participation because they wish to prevent harm. Such protection can be necessary in particular situations; however, when it becomes habitual and disproportionate, it may communicate that a child is incapable. The result may be reduced opportunities to practise daily living skills, express preferences, solve problems, and develop confidence. The central issue is therefore not whether children should receive protection, but how protection can be calibrated so that it does not displace agency. This article refers to this shift as the movement from protection-oriented care to empowering care.

International inclusive-education principles support this orientation. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes the right to inclusive education and emphasizes the development of human potential, dignity, talents, and effective participation. It also requires reasonable accommodation and individualized support (United Nations, 2006). The Salamanca Statement similarly positioned schools as institutions that should respond to learner diversity rather than require learners to fit a narrow norm (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusive education is thus not simply the placement of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms; it involves transforming teaching, environments, relationships, and institutional arrangements to reduce barriers to learning and participation (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Florian, 2014; Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Morina, 2017; Mitchell, 2014; CAST, 2024).

Artificial intelligence introduces a further dimension to this discussion. AI-enabled tools may support access through automatic captions, speech recognition, text-to-speech, image descriptions, translation, adaptive presentation of content, and communication assistance. These functions may reduce particular barriers for learners with diverse sensory, language, communication, or learning needs. Research on AI in education has identified opportunities for personalization, feedback, assessment, and learning support (Chen et al., 2020; Hwang et al., 2020; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). However, technology does not automatically produce inclusion. Poorly designed systems can reproduce bias, exclude users whose data are underrepresented, collect sensitive information, or encourage dependence on automated outputs. AI may therefore expand agency, but it may also create new forms of control and exclusion.

These concerns are especially significant when AI is used with children. UNESCO's guidance calls for a human-centred approach, protection of data privacy, age-appropriate use, and pedagogical validation of generative AI (Miao & Holmes, 2023). UNICEF (2021) likewise emphasizes children's safety, privacy, inclusion, and well-being in AI systems. Scholars have warned that educational AI should be assessed not only in terms of efficiency but also in relation to power, surveillance, teacher roles, and the values embedded in automated systems (Holmes et al., 2022; Selwyn, 2019; Williamson & Eynon, 2020). For children with special needs, the stakes include whether a system respects individual communication preferences and supports meaningful participation rather than defining the child through automated classifications.

An Islamic perspective can deepen this debate by asking not only what AI can do, but what purposes it should serve and what responsibilities govern its use. Concepts such as karamah insaniyyah (human dignity), 'adl (justice), amanah (trust and responsibility), maslahah (public benefit), and maqasid al-shari'ah offer normative resources for evaluating technological practices. Islamic epistemology also emphasizes the ethical conduct of the knower, the

verification of claims, and the recognition that tools do not independently establish truth. In this view, AI-generated output is a resource requiring scrutiny, not an autonomous source of moral or religious authority. The principles of verification and responsible speech are consistent with Q.S. al-Hujurat [49]: 6 and Q.S. al-Isra' [17]: 36.

Existing discussions of overprotection and empowering care do not always address the ethical and epistemological implications of AI-supported inclusion. Conversely, AI-in-education debates may discuss accessibility and personalization without sufficiently connecting them to Islamic understandings of dignity, responsibility, and human agency. This article addresses that conceptual intersection. It asks: (1) How can Islamic ethical principles guide the use of AI in supporting children with special needs? (2) What epistemological limits should be placed on AI in inclusive education? and (3) How can AI support a transition from protection-oriented care to empowerment-oriented participation?

The article argues that AI should be positioned as an assistive mediator within a human-centered ecosystem involving the child, family, teachers, specialists, and community. Its contribution is a four-dimensional framework that connects dignity and justice, amanah and data responsibility, epistemic accountability, and capability-oriented empowerment. The framework is intended as a conceptual guide for educators and institutions, not as a validated intervention model or a claim that AI has already improved outcomes for a particular group of children.

Methods

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative conceptual-reflective design. It combines critical literature analysis with reflection on the author's observations and discussions concerning the mentoring of children with special needs. The purpose is to construct an interpretive framework linking Islamic ethics, inclusive pedagogy, and the responsible use of AI. It is not an experimental study, a survey, or an evaluation of a specific AI product.

Sources and Scope

The documentary sources comprise (a) Islamic normative references, particularly Qur'anic passages concerning human dignity, justice, responsibility, verification, and protection of vulnerable generations; (b) international and national policy frameworks on disability rights, inclusive education, and AI governance; and (c) scholarly literature on AI in education, disability inclusion, assistive technology, and educational ethics. Reflective material is used to contextualize the problem of overprotection and the importance of gradual independence. The original manuscript refers to discussions with a mentor teacher and a parent; because it does not provide a documented interview protocol, participant profile, dates, consent procedure, or verbatim transcripts, these discussions are treated only as informal reflective context and not as a formal qualitative interview dataset.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded through four stages. First, relevant sources were read and categorized around dignity, justice, responsibility, knowledge validation, accessibility, autonomy, and participation. Second, recurring ethical risks and educational opportunities associated with AI were mapped against the practical problem of overprotection. Third, the categories were synthesized into four interrelated dimensions of an Islamic ethical and epistemological framework. Fourth, the framework was examined for practical implications for

children, families, teachers, and educational institutions. The analysis is interpretive and conceptual; it does not estimate causal effects or measure the effectiveness of AI tools.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To avoid overstating the evidence, claims about the effects of overprotection or AI are presented as conceptual propositions supported by literature, not as statistically demonstrated findings from this study. No identifiable child data are reported. Any future empirical application of the framework should obtain informed parental consent and age-appropriate child assent, protect disability-related and educational data, ensure accessible participation, and provide a clear mechanism for human review and correction.

Results

1. From Protective Care to Empowering Care

The analysis indicates that protection and empowerment should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Children may require safeguards, supervision, communication assistance, or physical support. The ethical problem arises when assistance is provided automatically without considering the child's preferences, capacities, or opportunity to learn. Empowering care therefore uses the least restrictive and most enabling form of support appropriate to the situation. It asks what the child can do independently, what can be achieved with adaptation, and what assistance remains necessary.

Four practical characteristics distinguish empowering care. First, the child is invited to make choices in ways that are accessible to them. Second, daily living and learning skills are practised progressively, with assistance adjusted as competence develops. Third, educators and families identify strengths and interests rather than defining the child primarily through limitations. Fourth, the child is included in classroom and community responsibilities with reasonable accommodation. This approach aligns with the capability perspective, which evaluates development through real opportunities to do and be what a person has reason to value (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1999).

2. AI-Enabled Possibilities for Inclusive Participation

The literature suggests several categories of AI-enabled support that may be relevant to inclusive education. Speech-to-text and captioning can make spoken information more accessible to some deaf or hard-of-hearing learners. Text-to-speech, screen-reading functions, and image-description tools may assist some learners with visual access needs. Speech recognition and augmentative communication applications may support expression for learners who experience communication barriers. Adaptive systems may allow educators to vary the pace, format, or complexity of learning materials. Translation and language-support tools may reduce some linguistic barriers. These are potential affordances, not guaranteed outcomes; suitability depends on the learner, language, disability profile, interface design, and classroom context.

The analysis also identifies a key distinction between assistance and substitution. An AI tool can provide an alternative format, prompt a next step, or make a task more accessible. It should not automatically make decisions on behalf of the child, replace the teacher's professional judgment, or become the sole channel through which a learner communicates. The child's own preferences and experience must remain central. Assistive technology is most

meaningful when it increases access and control rather than merely automating tasks (WHO & UNICEF, 2022).

3. Ethical and Epistemological Risks

Four risks are especially relevant. The first is algorithmic bias: systems trained on incomplete or unrepresentative data may misrecognize speech, misinterpret behaviour, or provide lower-quality support for particular groups. The second is privacy risk: disability-related information, communication records, learning profiles, and behavioural data are sensitive and should not be collected or shared without a clear educational purpose and appropriate safeguards. The third is epistemic over-reliance: educators or learners may accept AI-generated explanations, assessments, or recommendations without checking their accuracy. The fourth is agency displacement: automated recommendations may narrow choices or encourage adults to treat a system's classification as more authoritative than the child's own account.

These risks show why technical accuracy alone is insufficient. A tool may function as designed and still be inappropriate if it undermines dignity, creates unnecessary surveillance, or excludes a learner from decision-making. Ethical evaluation must therefore consider the purpose of use, the distribution of benefits and risks, the availability of alternatives, and the possibility of human correction. This is consistent with human-centered AI guidance and child-centered AI principles (Miao & Holmes, 2023; UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2021).

4. A Four-Dimensional Islamic Framework

The synthesis produces a framework with four mutually reinforcing dimensions. It is proposed as a set of evaluative questions for selecting, implementing, and reviewing AI-supported practices in inclusive education.

Tabel 1 Dimensional Islamic Framework

Dimension	Islamic and educational grounding	Guiding questions for AI-assisted inclusion
Human dignity and justice	Karamah insaniyyah; 'adl; equal educational rights	Does the tool respect the child's dignity, provide accessible participation, and avoid discriminatory classification or exclusion?
Amanah and data responsibility	Amanah; accountability; protection from harm	Are data collection, storage, access, consent, and sharing limited to what is necessary and transparently governed?
Epistemic responsibility and human mediation	Tabayyun; responsible knowledge; teacher and family judgment	Are AI outputs checked against reliable sources and professional knowledge? Can the child, family, or teacher question and correct the output?
Capability-oriented empowerment	Maslahah; agency; gradual independence and participation	Does the tool expand the child's real choices and skills, or does it create dependence and transfer decisions away from the child?

Discussion

1. Islamic Ethics: Dignity, Justice, and Amanah in AI Use

The first implication is that children with special needs should not be treated as passive recipients of technological intervention. The Qur'anic concept of human honour (Q.S. al-Isra' [17]: 70) supports an understanding of dignity that is not conditional on productivity, speed,

communication style, or conformity to standardized performance. Q.S. al-Hujurat [49]: 13 further challenges status hierarchies based on outward difference. In educational terms, these principles require institutions to assess AI tools by whether they expand equal opportunities and respond to individual requirements.

Justice does not mean providing identical technological arrangements to every learner. It means providing support responsive to actual barriers and needs. An AI-enabled platform that works well for learners who use standard speech or language patterns may be inaccessible to others. Therefore, procurement and implementation should include accessibility testing with diverse users, reasonable accommodation, and non-digital alternatives. The CRPD's emphasis on individualized support and full participation provides an important rights-based complement to the Islamic ethical commitment to justice (United Nations, 2006).

Amanah adds a responsibility dimension. Educational institutions hold information about children in trust; they should not treat personal data as an unlimited resource for experimentation or commercial convenience. Before adopting an AI tool, schools should identify what data it collects, why those data are needed, who can access them, whether they are transferred to third parties, and how long they are retained. For children, consent and assent must be meaningful and understandable. Data minimization and human accountability are not merely technical compliance tasks; they express the moral responsibility to avoid harm.

The integration of artificial intelligence into educational settings also needs to consider differences in institutional resources and learners' access to digital technologies. Research on the implementation of Canva AI in elementary schools with limited resources illustrates the importance of examining AI-supported learning within its actual educational context (Al.Mardhafi et al., 2026). Therefore, AI-assisted inclusive education should not be evaluated solely in terms of technological sophistication but also in terms of accessibility, contextual appropriateness, and its contribution to educational equity.

2. Epistemology: AI as a Tool, Not an Independent Authority

AI systems generate outputs through computational processes and patterns in data. Their fluency should not be confused with understanding, truth, or moral authority. Generative systems may produce inaccurate statements, fabricated references, or confident but misleading explanations. In Islamic epistemological terms, the obligation of *tabayyun* requires claims to be checked before they are accepted or transmitted (Q.S. al-Hujurat [49]: 6). Q.S. al-Isra' [17]: 36 similarly cautions against following what one has no sound knowledge of.

This principle has direct implications for inclusive education. If an AI system suggests a learner's ability level, predicts behaviour, or recommends an intervention, the output should be treated as provisional information. Teachers, specialists, families, and—where possible—the child must be able to examine whether the recommendation fits the learner's lived experience. A system should not become the final authority on diagnosis, placement, capability, or educational potential. Human mediation is essential because educational decisions involve context, relationships, values, and consequences that cannot be reduced to an automated score.

The same caution applies to AI-generated learning materials, including religious content. Sources, quotations, translations, and interpretations must be verified through authoritative texts and qualified educators. AI can support preparation and accessibility, but it cannot replace scholarly responsibility or the pedagogical relationship. This position is

consistent with scholarship that calls for ethical, transparent, and accountable AI in education (Holmes et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2023).

3. Social Transformation: From Dependence to Participation

The social value of AI-assisted inclusion should be assessed through the opportunities it creates for participation. For example, a communication aid may allow a learner to express preferences during classroom activities; captions may enable fuller participation in discussion; accessible text formats may support independent engagement with learning materials. In each case, the intended outcome is not simply task completion but greater control over communication, learning, and social interaction.

This changes the role of parents and teachers. They remain responsible for care and protection, but they also become facilitators who select appropriate supports, teach the child how to use them, and gradually adjust assistance. The relevant question is not whether AI can perform a task faster than a child, but whether the use of AI helps the child develop a skill, communicate a choice, or participate more meaningfully. Where automation removes the child from the activity, it may reproduce the very overprotection that the article seeks to challenge.

The development of digital learning environments, including augmented and virtual reality, demonstrates the expanding possibilities of technology in transforming elementary education (Barikliya et al., 2026). However, technological innovation should be accompanied by pedagogical considerations that ensure learners remain active participants in the learning process. In inclusive education, this means that digital tools must support individual capabilities and independence rather than create new forms of dependency.

Digital learning evaluation also provides opportunities to monitor learning progress and support more responsive instructional decisions. Previous work on the transformation of digital learning evaluation emphasizes the relevance of technology-supported assessment in contemporary education (Najwa & Nur Hasanah, 2026). For learners with special educational needs, such assessment should be designed to recognize individual progress and developmental potential rather than rely exclusively on standardized performance indicators.

The proposed framework also recognizes that technology cannot solve structural exclusion by itself. Stigma, inaccessible buildings, inadequate teacher preparation, limited funding, and weak coordination between home and school remain significant barriers. AI may assist with particular access needs, but inclusive transformation requires institutional commitment, accessible infrastructure, trained personnel, family collaboration, and a culture that recognizes children as participants rather than objects of charity (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

4. Practical Implications for Families, Teachers, and Institutions

For families, AI should be introduced through shared decision-making and attention to the child's preferences. Parents can begin with a clearly defined need, test whether a tool is understandable and useful, and review whether it increases or decreases independent participation. The child should not be compelled to use an application simply because it is available.

For teachers, AI use should be linked to an individualized learning objective and reviewed through observation. Teachers should distinguish between an accommodation that enables access and an automation that takes over the learning process. They should also explain

AI-generated content, check its accuracy, provide alternative formats, and maintain opportunities for peer interaction and direct communication.

For educational institutions, implementation should include an AI-use policy covering age appropriateness, accessibility, data protection, transparency, human oversight, procurement standards, incident reporting, and review of outcomes. Institutions should consult children with disabilities and their families when selecting tools. Evaluation should include not only academic performance but also autonomy, communication, choice, belonging, and participation. These measures are consistent with broader calls for trustworthy AI governance and responsible educational technology (European Commission, 2022; OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021).

5. Limitations and Future Research

This article is conceptual and reflective. It does not report a systematic review with a reproducible search protocol, a formal interview study, or an empirical evaluation of AI tools with children. The informal discussions described in the original manuscript are not sufficiently documented to support claims about prevalence, causal effects, or statistical significance. Accordingly, the framework should be understood as a reasoned proposal rather than a validated model.

Future research could examine the framework through participatory case studies in inclusive schools, involving children with different support needs, families, teachers, and specialists. Studies should evaluate specific tools against clearly defined outcomes, including usability, accessibility, learner agency, privacy, and participation. Longitudinal research would be useful for determining whether AI-supported accommodations strengthen skills over time or create new forms of dependence. Research should also include the perspectives of children themselves, using accessible consent and data-collection procedures.

Conclusion

The movement from protection to empowerment remains central to ethical care for children with special needs. Protection is necessary when it prevents harm, but it becomes restrictive when it routinely replaces the child's choices, skills, and participation. AI introduces opportunities to reduce barriers through accessible communication, alternative formats, and adaptive learning support. Yet these opportunities are not inherently inclusive or ethically neutral.

This article proposes a four-dimensional Islamic ethical and epistemological framework for AI-assisted inclusive education: human dignity and justice; amanah and responsible data stewardship; epistemic responsibility and human mediation; and capability-oriented empowerment. Together, these dimensions position AI as an assistive resource under human responsibility, rather than an authority that determines a child's identity, ability, or future. The value of AI should ultimately be judged by whether it expands children's real opportunities to learn, choose, communicate, and participate.

The framework's practical implication is clear: families and educators should not ask only whether an AI tool can perform a task, but whether its use supports the child's agency and well-being. Institutions must ensure accessibility, privacy, transparency, human oversight, and meaningful involvement of children and families. Empirical research is still needed to test the framework across educational contexts and disability profiles. A genuinely inclusive AI future

is therefore not defined by technological sophistication alone, but by the extent to which technology serves human dignity, justice, and shared social participation.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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