

STRATEGIES FOR SHAPING STUDENTS' RELIGIOUS CHARACTER THROUGH ISLAMIC EDUCATION AT MADRASAH TSANAWIYAH

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) as a strategic instrument in shaping students' religious character at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Datarang. The research employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of religious activities in the school environment. The findings reveal that the implementation of IRE is carried out through two main strategies: value-based formal learning using interactive lectures, thematic discussions, and religious case studies; and the habituation of Islamic values through routine programs such as morning Qur'anic recitation (tadarus), congregational dhuha prayers, and the school culture of greetings, smiles, and polite interaction (3S). The exemplary role of teachers and the synergy between school and family are key factors in the internalization of religious values. However, challenges such as inconsistency in teachers' behavior and external environmental influences still need to be addressed collaboratively. This study concludes that reflective and contextual implementation of IRE has proven effective in sustainably developing students' religious character.

Keywords: *Islamic Education; Religious Character; Value-Based Learning; School Culture; Teacher Role Model.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implementasi Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) sebagai sarana strategis dalam pembentukan karakter religius siswa di Madrasah Tsanawiyah Datarang. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan jenis studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi terhadap kegiatan keagamaan di sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa implementasi PAI dilakukan melalui dua



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strategi utama: pembelajaran formal berbasis nilai melalui metode ceramah interaktif, diskusi tematik, dan studi kasus keagamaan; serta pembiasaan nilai-nilai keislaman melalui program rutin seperti tadarus pagi, shalat dhuha berjamaah, dan budaya salam, senyum, dan sapa (3S). Peran keteladanan guru serta sinergi antara sekolah dan keluarga menjadi faktor kunci dalam internalisasi nilai-nilai religius. Namun demikian, tantangan seperti ketidakkonsistenan perilaku guru dan pengaruh lingkungan luar masih perlu diatasi secara kolaboratif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa implementasi PAI yang reflektif dan kontekstual terbukti efektif dalam membentuk karakter religius siswa secara berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: *Pendidikan Agama Islam; Karakter Religius; Pembelajaran Nilai; Budaya Sekolah; Keteladanan Guru.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious character constitutes a fundamental pillar in the holistic development of students' personalities (Hamami & Nuryana, 2022; Lahmar, 2020; Mulyana, 2023). In the era of globalization, which is marked by moral challenges and value disruption, strengthening religious character has become an urgent necessity within the education system. A well-embedded religious character serves as the foundation for students to act with honesty, discipline, responsibility, and strong spiritual integrity in both personal and social life (Dakir et al., 2015; Muhamad et al., 2023; Ru'iyah et al., 2023; Taufik, 2020; Tsani et al., 2024).

As part of the national curriculum, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a strategic role in instilling values of faith, worship, ethics, and social conduct (*muamalah*) among students. IRE is not merely understood as a process of transferring religious knowledge, but rather as a transformative process of values and the holistic formation of religious character (Lafrarchi, 2020; Masturin, 2022; Ru'iyah et al., 2023; Suhayib & Ansyari, 2023; Taufik, 2020; Tsani et al., 2024). Through value-based learning approaches and the reinforcement of school culture, IRE is believed to be capable of shaping students into individuals of noble character with high spiritual integrity.

Nevertheless, the implementation of IRE in practice continues to face various challenges. Studies indicate that inconsistency in teachers' role modeling (Roza, 2021), the weakness of value-based school culture (Fitria & Karnadi, 2023), and the limited involvement of families in religious education constitute serious obstacles to the internalization of religious values. Furthermore, external environments that are permissive and unsupportive of religious practices exacerbate the difficulties faced by students in actualizing religious values (Fawaid et al., 2024; Juwaini et al., 2025; Rahayu & Dewi, 2018; Zulela et al., 2022).

Previous research has highlighted various strategies for shaping religious character. Synergy between schools and families has been shown to encourage the consistent development of religious habits (Anni & Hakim, 2020; Ferdinan et al., 2025; Hudri & Hunainah, 2021), while the strengthening of religious school culture through routine programs such as Qur'anic recitation (*tadarus*) and congregational prayers has become part of the internalization process (Lutfiana et al., 2021).

The active role of school principals and teachers is also crucial in ensuring the successful implementation of Islamic values in schools (Ferdinan et al., 2024). Other studies have found that practice-based activities such as *tahfidz*, hadith studies, and daily worship guidance strongly influence the formation of students' discipline and spiritual responsibility (Samad et al., 2023). However, most of these studies emphasize only one particular aspect and do not explain the interconnectedness of formal learning, value habituation, and role modeling simultaneously.

A gap in the literature is evident in the limited research that examines the integration of the three pillars of religious character formation—namely learning strategies, school culture, and teacher role modeling—within a comprehensive model of implementation. Many studies remain partial and have yet to demonstrate the synergy among these elements. The novelty of this study lies in its holistic analysis of the implementation of Islamic Religious Education by integrating these three aspects, particularly in the context of MTs Muhammadiyah Datarang, which is characterized by a strong socio-religious background.

Based on these issues, this study aims to analyze the strategies for implementing Islamic Religious Education in shaping students' religious character through classroom learning, the habituation of Islamic values in the school environment, and the role modeling and synergy between school and family. This research is expected to contribute scientifically to the development of integrative and contextual models of IRE implementation, as well as enrich the discourse on religious character education within Islamic secondary education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. This approach was chosen because it enables the exploration of meaning, contextual understanding, and in-depth explanation of the phenomenon of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) implementation as a medium for shaping students' religious character in a holistic manner. In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, involving deep engagement with the research field and participants (McInnes et al., 2017; Wa-Mbaleka, 2020).

The research was conducted at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Muhammadiyah Datarang, a lower secondary Islamic educational institution located in a rural area with a strong Muhammadiyah community base. The study took place over two months, from January to February 2025. The institution was purposively selected because it has implemented several programs aimed at strengthening religious character, integrated into both the curriculum and school culture.

The research subjects included the principal, Islamic Religious Education teachers, homeroom teachers, and students from grades VII to IX. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with criteria such as direct involvement in the implementation of religious programs or IRE learning, a minimum of one year of teaching experience at the madrasah, and willingness to provide honest and open information. These criteria ensured that informants possessed sufficient understanding of the dynamics of religious character formation within the school environment.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation focused on religious activities at school, such as morning Qur'anic recitation (*tadarus*), congregational *dhuha* prayers, and classroom IRE learning. Interviews were conducted with the principal, IRE teachers, homeroom teachers, and selected students to explore their perceptions and experiences in the process of internalizing religious values. Documentation included program plans of IRE teachers, schedules of religious activities, and records of student character evaluations.

Data analysis followed an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and organizing relevant information; data display was carried out in narrative and thematic categorization; and conclusions were drawn inductively based on field findings and the theoretical framework employed.

The validity of the data was tested through triangulation of sources and methods, by comparing data obtained from observation, interviews, and documentation across different informants. In addition, member checking was conducted by confirming findings and interpretations with informants to ensure accuracy and validity of the meanings captured by the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Strategies of Value-Based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Learning

The findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Muhammadiyah Datarang do not position religious instruction merely as the transmission of cognitive material, but as a medium for internalizing values that nurture students' religious attitudes. The learning model emphasizes integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Teachers consistently design lessons so that students not only *know* Islamic teachings, but also *feel* and *practice* them in daily life.

One teacher explained:

"We do not only teach the pillars of faith or the rules of worship theoretically. After each topic, I invite students to discuss how prayer protects us from immoral acts. This way, the practical value and life meaning become more tangible" (Interview, January 23, 2025).

Prominent strategies include value-based discussions, case studies, and direct practice. Teachers encourage reflective thinking by linking Islamic teachings to real-life situations. For example, when teaching honesty, the teacher connects the lesson to the Prophet Muhammad's role as *Al-Amin*, enabling students to understand religious values not only textually but also socially. Classroom observations revealed active student participation in discussions, sharing opinions, and relating lessons to personal experiences.

Lesson plans documented in the semester syllabus highlight spiritual achievement indicators such as: *"Students demonstrate humility, honesty, and responsibility in daily life."* This confirms that learning objectives are directed toward character formation rather than mere cognitive mastery.

Students themselves affirmed the impact of this approach:

"Our teacher often relates lessons to everyday life. For example, when learning about ablution, we practiced directly and were taught that maintaining cleanliness is part of faith" (Interview, January 30, 2025).

This demonstrates successful contextualization of religious instruction, where students internalize values beyond ritual requirements. The novelty of this study lies in identifying an integrative model of IRE learning that combines reflective thinking, contextualization, and direct practice simultaneously—contrasting with prior studies that emphasized only one dimension.

Thus, the IRE learning strategy at MTs Muhammadiyah Datarang contributes both theoretically and practically: enriching Islamic education discourse with a

value-based integrative model, and offering replicable strategies for other schools with contextual adjustments.

1. Value Reflection: Students are encouraged to critically contemplate the relevance of Islamic teachings to contemporary moral challenges.
2. Contextualization: Teaching materials are linked to students' real-life experiences, ensuring that Islamic teachings are not perceived as abstract.
3. Direct Practice: Students are engaged in worship exercises and the internalization of values, thereby forming habits that impact their real-world behavior.

This integrative model can be regarded as a novel approach to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at the madrasah tsanawiyah level, as it emphasizes not only theoretical understanding but also a layered process of value transformation. Thus, PAI learning at MTs Muhammadiyah Datarang holds both theoretical and practical significance: theoretically, it enriches the study of value-based Islamic education; and practically, it provides an example of a strategy that can be replicated in other madrasahs with contextual adjustments.

Habituation of Religious Values Through School Culture

The madrasah consistently cultivates a religious school culture embedded in students' daily routines. Observations revealed that collective religious practices form part of the school rhythm: morning Qur'anic recitation (*tadarus*), congregational *dhuha* prayers, and recitation of *asmaul husna* precede classroom learning. These activities function not as symbolic rituals but as collective habits that reinforce spiritual values through repetition and consistency.

The principal emphasized:

"We believe character is formed through habit. Therefore, tadarus, dhuha prayers, and daily sermons are mandatory. This is how we build a living spiritual atmosphere" (Interview, January 20, 2025).

School documentation shows a calendar of annual religious activities such as Ramadan pesantren, call to prayer competitions, Qur'an memorization contests, and Prophet's birthday commemorations. Students also deliver short sermons (*kultum*) on a rotating basis, demonstrating their active role in sustaining religious traditions.

One student reflected:

"At first I joined dhuha prayers just because everyone did it. But now I enjoy it and feel comfortable" (Interview, February 6, 2025).

This illustrates how routine practices transform compulsory participation into genuine spiritual awareness. In addition, the school enforces the 3S culture (*smile, salam, sapa*—smile, greeting, and polite interaction), fostering harmonious social relations. Thus, religiosity permeates both ritual and social dimensions of school life.

The study identifies three distinguishing aspects:

1. Role modeling as hidden curriculum
Teachers embody values through everyday conduct, reinforcing character formation beyond formal instruction.
2. Participatory religious leadership
The principal not only enforces policies but actively participates in religious practices, modeling leadership through example.
3. Teacher–principal synergy
Teachers provide direct role models in classrooms, while the principal institutionalizes religious culture at the organizational level, creating a sustainable ecosystem.

Thus, it can be affirmed that the successful implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Muhammadiyah Datarang is determined not only by instructional strategies or religious culture programs, but is also strongly supported by the exemplary conduct of teachers and consistent leadership of the school principal. This research provides a theoretical contribution, demonstrating that religious character education requires a leadership model that is integrative, participatory, and exemplary-based—an aspect rarely prioritized in previous studies.

Teacher Role Modeling and Family Involvement

Teacher role modeling emerged as a critical factor in internalizing religious values. Teachers and homeroom advisors not only deliver lessons but also exemplify religious practices and courteous behavior. Observations showed teachers performing *dhuha* prayers with students, initiating greetings, and correcting students gently. Such actions foster respect and provide tangible examples of Islamic conduct.

A homeroom teacher noted:

“Students imitate more than they listen. If teachers are late or easily angered, students lose role models. That’s why we strive to be examples in worship, manners, and discipline” (Interview, February 2, 2025).

This statement affirms that the essence of religious character education lies not only in what is taught, but also in how teachers embody values in their daily lives. Teachers serve as a living curriculum, internalizing religious values through tangible behavior.

Beyond teachers, the madrasah principal plays a pivotal role as the primary architect of the religious culture. The principal ensures the consistent implementation of religious programs, ranging from *tadarus* (Quranic recitation), *shalat dhuha* (forenoon prayer), to daily *kultum* (short religious sermons). Rather than merely issuing instructions, the principal demonstrates exemplary-based leadership by actively participating in these religious activities and guiding teachers to do the same. Documentation from teacher meetings reveals that the principal consistently emphasizes the importance of teachers' consistent religious conduct as a powerful "hidden curriculum" that significantly influences students.

Through the combined roles of teachers as direct exemplars in the classroom and the principal as the driver of religious culture at the institutional level, a consistent and conducive school ecosystem is formed. The exemplary conduct of teachers functions as the foundation for shaping students' individual behavior, while the leadership of the principal reinforces these values into the school's collective identity.

The novelty of this research's findings can be identified from three key aspects:

1. Teacher role modeling as hidden curriculum

This study confirms that teachers' daily practices (such as performing *dhuha* prayers together, greeting with *salam*, and offering gentle reprimands) serve as the primary channel for value internalization. This indicates that religious character education is more effective through tangible exemplification than normative instruction.

2. Participatory School Leadership

The principal of MTs Muhammadiyah Datarang does not merely provide administrative direction but is directly present in religious activities. This fosters a leadership model that can be termed participatory religious leadership—a style that leads by example rather than by command alone.

3. Teacher–Principal Synergy as a Religious Ecosystem

A key finding is that teacher exemplarity and principal leadership mutually reinforce one another. Teachers serve as role models for students within the scope of classroom interactions, while the principal ensures the systemic implementation of religious culture. It is this synergy that creates a stable, sustainable, and institutionalized religious educational ecosystem.

Thus, this section demonstrates that the successful implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Muhammadiyah Datarang stems not only from instructional methods or religious habituation but is also strongly supported by consistent teacher exemplarity and school principal leadership. The combination of these two elements gives rise to an integrative, participatory, and sustainable model of religious character education—a novel perspective that enriches the study of value-based Islamic education.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Muhammadiyah Datarang in shaping students' religious character operates through three primary pillars: value-based learning strategies, cultivation of religious values, and synergy among school elements. These three pillars are driven by teachers, the school principal, and students as the main actors within the school environment.

First, the Islamic value-based learning strategies employed by PAI teachers have proven effective as a means of internalizing religious values. Teachers act not only as conveyors of material but also as facilitators of character formation through thematic discussions, case studies, and direct worship practice. This is consistent with interview results, which show teachers strive to connect Islamic teachings with students' life realities, thereby making learning contextual and meaningful. This finding reinforces the arguments of Lubis (2022) & Basri et al. (2022) that active-participatory learning which integrates religious values is more effective in building students' religious awareness than normative, text-based instruction.

Second, the cultivation of religious values through school programs serves as a crucial support for the success of PAI learning. The school principal plays a vital role in designing religious school policies, such as making morning *tadarus* (Qur'an recitation), congregational *dhuha* prayers, and midday *kultum* (religious sermons) mandatory agenda. The principal's role is not merely administrative but also ideological, ensuring the entire school community is involved in this religious culture. This finding aligns with the research of Lutfiana et al., (2021) which states that the success of a religious culture in school can only be achieved with the full support of the principal's leadership. Thus, the cultivation of values at MTs Muhammadiyah Datarang is not a formality but has become a *habitus* that shapes students' daily behavior.

Third, the role of students as both subjects and objects in the formation of religious character is highly significant. Students do not merely receive instruction and follow religious programs but are also actively involved in enlivening the school

culture. Activities such as rotating *kultum* duties, participation in Islamic holiday commemorations, and the habitual practice of exchanging greetings among peers demonstrate that students are part of the value internalization process, not merely passive recipients. This is in accordance with the perspective of (Samad et al., 2023) who argue that students' active involvement in religious practices has a tangible impact on the formation of spiritual discipline and moral responsibility.

The synergy between teachers, the principal, and students creates an educational ecosystem that supports the formation of religious character. Teachers play a role in value-based learning strategies, the principal functions as the director of religious culture through policy and example, while students engage as active agents who embody these values in their daily lives. This synergistic interaction shows that the formation of religious character at MTs Muhammadiyah Datarang is not the result of a single party's efforts, but stems from the collaboration of all school elements. This strengthens the view of (Taufik, 2020) that religious education will only be effective if implemented in an integrated manner across all aspects of school life.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as a means of shaping students' religious character at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Muhammadiyah Datarang. The results show that the formation of religious character is conducted through three main pillars: Islamic value-based learning strategies, cultivation of religious values through school programs, and exemplary conduct reinforced by the principal's leadership. Teachers act as facilitators of contextual learning, the principal as the director of religious culture, and students as active subjects engaged in value internalization. The synergy among these three elements makes the implementation of PAI more effective in sustainably shaping students' religious character.

Academically, this study contributes to Islamic education literature by asserting that the formation of religious character cannot be separated from a school ecosystem that integrally involves the roles of teachers, the principal, and students. The findings strengthen the argument that religious education must be carried out not only in the cognitive domain but also through consistent habituation and exemplary conduct. Therefore, the integrative model identified can serve as a reference for developing theories of Islamic-based character education, while also providing practical guidance for the management of madrasahs and value-based schools.

Although this study provides an in-depth picture, certain limitations should be noted. The research data focused only on teachers, the principal, and students, thus not offering a comprehensive portrayal of the role of families or the surrounding community. Furthermore, the research was conducted over a relatively short period of two months, and therefore does not fully capture long-term dynamics. Consequently, future research is recommended to expand the subjects to include families and the community as school partners in shaping religious character, and to employ a longitudinal design to observe the consistency of PAI implementation over a longer period.

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