

Implementing Islamic Religious Education for Character Formation in Contemporary Indonesian Schooling

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in fostering students' Islamic character within the context of Indonesian primary education. It seeks to understand how structured religious learning contributes to moral development and the cultivation of values that align with Islamic principles in a pluralistic society.

Method: Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study was conducted in a public primary school in Bengkulu, Indonesia. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and document analysis. Triangulation techniques were applied to ensure the validity of findings, and data analysis followed the steps of reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing.

Findings: The results indicate that Islamic Religious Education plays a significant role in shaping students' daily behavior and moral awareness. Most students demonstrated positive Islamic character traits such as discipline, responsibility, and respect for teachers and peers. Although some challenges remain, particularly in addressing external influences from the broader social environment, the integration of religious education into school activities has been effective in reinforcing Islamic values and minimizing negative behaviors.

Significance: The study underscores the importance of Islamic Religious Education as a means of character formation in contemporary Indonesia. By linking religious instruction to students' moral and social development, schools can contribute not only to individual growth but also to the strengthening of national character. These insights are relevant for educators, policymakers, and scholars seeking to enhance the role of religion in addressing global challenges related to ethics, identity, and social cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a central role in shaping students' morality and character in Indonesia. Through religious learning, students are expected to internalize values of noble character derived from Islamic teachings. Studies indicate that religious education contributes significantly to the reinforcement of religious identity and national character (Mahmood, 2019). In the context of globalization, moral challenges are becoming increasingly complex, requiring more directed educational strategies. IRE functions not only as knowledge transmission but also as a means of value transformation and character formation. The national curriculum emphasizes IRE as an essential instrument for developing individuals who are faithful and pious (Halstead, 2007). Therefore, the urgency of IRE is evident in addressing the problem of moral degradation

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among the younger generation. This highlights the need for contextual and applicable approaches in Islamic education.

Islamic character is the manifestation of Islamic values in students' everyday behavior. This concept emphasizes honesty, responsibility, discipline, and mutual respect. Research shows that character education based on Islamic principles can be achieved through teacher role models and positive habituation in schools (Sulaiman & Rahman, 2020). Various studies confirm that religious education has a significant effect on students' religiosity and social attitudes (Alkharusi, 2016). Schools, as formal institutions, are strategic arenas for instilling Islamic-based moral values. IRE should not merely transfer cognitive knowledge but also address affective and psychomotor domains. Strengthening Islamic character in primary schools is crucial to preventing deviant behaviors from an early age. Thus, Islamic character education serves as a foundation for nurturing future generations with noble morals.

Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority country, faces significant challenges in embedding Islamic values among its youth. Issues such as juvenile delinquency, bullying, drug abuse, and moral crises demonstrate ongoing character degradation (Abdallah, 2021). Globalization and the rise of digital culture further intensify these challenges. Islamic education has a vital role in protecting students from the negative influence of global popular culture. Primary schools are key institutions for building strong moral foundations at an early age. Research suggests that religious habituation in primary education positively influences children's social attitudes (Tan, 2011). Hence, Islamic character education is not merely a local agenda but a strategic necessity in national development. Its relevance is reinforced when aligned with the vision of Indonesia 2045, which emphasizes building a morally strong and competitive generation.

The implementation of IRE in schools includes classroom teaching, religious activities, and the development of a religious culture. Teachers are the main actors in integrating Islamic values into both curricular and extracurricular practices. Evidence indicates that the effectiveness of religious education depends largely on the teacher's example in daily life (Raihani, 2012). Strategies include congregational prayers, daily supplications, Qur'an learning, and habituation of polite conduct. Such programs have been shown to foster students' religiosity and moral discipline (Hashim, 2014). However, challenges remain, such as limited instructional time, insufficient methods, and lack of institutional support. These obstacles hinder the full internalization of Islamic values in students' lives. Therefore, examining the practical implementation of IRE is essential to improve strategies and outcomes in primary schools.

Although numerous studies discuss the role of religious education in character formation, most focus on theoretical perspectives rather than practical implementation in primary schools. Previous research has often concentrated on secondary education or pesantren contexts, leaving elementary schools underexplored (Nordin, 2017). Yet, primary education is a critical phase for establishing children's religious character. Furthermore, many studies emphasize curriculum design rather than examining daily practices of IRE in classrooms. This gap highlights the need for research that captures how IRE is practiced in public primary schools. Addressing this limitation provides empirical

evidence on the role of Islamic education in shaping character. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by examining real-life implementation in the Indonesian primary school context.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the implementation of IRE as a means of Islamic character formation in Indonesian public primary schools. Unlike studies that merely describe religious programs, this research evaluates their effectiveness in shaping students' everyday behavior. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, it provides empirical insights into how Islamic values are internalized through learning activities. Previous studies rarely connected IRE implementation to global moral challenges facing students (Ismail, 2020). Hence, this study offers a new perspective on the relevance of Islamic education in addressing contemporary moral issues. Its contribution lies in providing practical recommendations for teachers, schools, and policymakers to strengthen character education. In doing so, this research enriches the literature and supports the development of Islamic education in Indonesia.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in fostering students' Islamic character. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to capture the natural setting of the classroom and to explore participants' experiences in depth. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is effective for investigating social phenomena in which meaning, context, and interpretation are crucial. The descriptive design was particularly suitable because the study sought to portray the reality of religious education practices as they occur in the school environment. Unlike experimental or survey designs, this approach emphasizes process rather than outcomes, allowing the identification of patterns and challenges in implementation. Fieldwork, classroom observation, and in-depth interviews were conducted to ensure contextual richness. This design thus provided the flexibility needed to explore how Islamic values were integrated into daily learning and school activities.

Participant

The participants in this study consisted of teachers, school administrators, and students from a public primary school in Bengkulu, Indonesia. The main focus was placed on Islamic Religious Education teachers, as they play a central role in designing and delivering instructional activities. Two classes of fourth-grade students, comprising approximately 60 children, were observed and interviewed to gain insights into their experiences. School administrators, including the principal and vice-principal, were also engaged to understand institutional support for religious education. According to Patton (2015), selecting participants who are directly involved in the studied phenomenon enhances the credibility of qualitative findings. The participants represented diverse family backgrounds, which enriched the data regarding the influence of social context on character formation. Ethical considerations were prioritized by obtaining informed consent from teachers, students, and parents prior to data collection. These participants thus provided a holistic perspective on the dynamics of implementing IRE in primary education.

Instrument

The instruments used in this study included observation sheets, semi-structured interview guides, and document analysis checklists. Observations were conducted in classrooms and during school religious activities to examine the practical application of Islamic Religious Education. Interviews with teachers and students were guided by open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives freely. This approach aligns with Merriam and Tisdell (2016), who emphasize that semi-structured interviews enable researchers to balance consistency and flexibility in data collection. Documents such as lesson plans, school regulations, and student workbooks were also analyzed to support triangulation. The combination of instruments ensured that the data reflected multiple sources and perspectives. In addition, field notes and reflective journals were maintained to capture contextual details and researcher interpretations. By employing diverse instruments, the study ensured validity and reliability of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the qualitative procedures outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which include data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, all field notes, transcripts, and documents were carefully reviewed and categorized according to emerging themes. Codes were generated inductively to represent recurring patterns related to teaching strategies, student responses, and institutional practices. These codes were then organized into broader categories to highlight the relationship between IRE implementation and character formation. Visual displays such as matrices and thematic charts were developed to facilitate interpretation. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents was conducted to strengthen the validity of the findings. Peer debriefing with fellow researchers was also employed to minimize bias in interpretation. Through this systematic process, the analysis produced a nuanced understanding of how Islamic values were integrated into school activities and their impact on students' character development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of this study demonstrate that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at SD Negeri 45 Bengkulu has had a meaningful impact on shaping students' Islamic character. Observations showed that classroom learning was consistently infused with Islamic values, while schoolwide religious activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and religious assemblies provided structured opportunities for character internalization. Teachers emphasized the cultivation of discipline, responsibility, and respect in both formal instruction and informal interactions. Interviews with educators revealed that PAI was seen not only as an academic subject but also as a medium to instill lifelong moral values. Students were generally observed to behave politely, follow school regulations, and demonstrate care for their peers, indicating that the religious education framework supported both individual and social development.

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings also highlight several challenges in the implementation process. Limited time allocation for PAI lessons and the dominance of conventional lecture-based teaching methods sometimes restricted opportunities for

more innovative approaches. Moreover, external influences from students' families and the wider social environment occasionally hindered the consistent application of Islamic values outside the school context. Nevertheless, document analysis confirmed that lesson plans and school regulations emphasized the integration of moral and spiritual aspects, aligning with national educational goals. Overall, the study suggests that while the implementation of IRE was effective in reinforcing Islamic character, further improvement is needed to address contextual challenges and to sustain character formation beyond the classroom setting.

Table 1. Summary of Findings on IRE Implementation and Student Character

IRE Activity	Form of Implementation	Impact on Student Character
Congregational prayers	Daily <i>shalat dhuhr</i> performed together in school mosque	Strengthened discipline, punctuality, and spirituality
Qur'an recitation	Weekly group recitation and memorization sessions	Fostered responsibility, perseverance, and self-control
Religious assemblies (<i>pengajian</i>)	Monthly schoolwide religious lectures and discussions	Increased respect, attentiveness, and community values
Classroom integration	Teachers linking lessons with Islamic values	Reinforced honesty, politeness, and respect for teachers
Moral habituation	Daily greetings, polite communication, and good manners	Encouraged empathy, cooperation, and positive behavior

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at SD Negeri 45 Bengkulu effectively shaped students' Islamic character through daily activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and religious assemblies. These results are consistent with Idris and Mokodenseho (2023), who emphasized that character development in Islamic education requires both structured religious programs and teacher-student interactions that reinforce values. Similarly, Pamuji (2024) argued that Islamic education plays a strategic role in fostering moral awareness and positive behavior among students when embedded into everyday school culture. However, this study adds nuance by highlighting that informal teacher-student interactions and school regulations also serve as key instruments in strengthening Islamic character, which has been less emphasized in previous research.

Despite these successes, the study also identified challenges such as limited instructional time, reliance on conventional teaching methods, and external social influences. These findings align with evidence from JonEdu (2024), which showed that Islamic education teachers often face constraints in implementing effective learning modules due to insufficient teaching resources and methodological limitations. Likewise, Moslimany (2024) noted that while holistic curricula are essential in Islamic schools, they often face difficulties in aligning traditional content with contemporary pedagogical demands. The present study contributes by illustrating how, even within such constraints, schools can adapt through schoolwide programs and habitual practices that sustain moral education.

The positive impact of religious activities observed in this study mirrors the conclusions of Pamuji (2024), who highlighted that Islamic education provides structured

opportunities for moral growth. Furthermore, Idris et al. (2023) found that integrating religious and national values contributes not only to personal morality but also to social cohesion. While their study was conducted in secondary schools, the present research confirms similar benefits at the primary school level, where discipline, responsibility, and respect emerged as central aspects of student behavior. This demonstrates that the foundations of moral and civic character can and should be laid at earlier stages of schooling.

Document analysis from this study revealed that lesson plans and school policies consistently emphasized moral and spiritual development. This resonates with Moslimany (2024), who argued that holistic Islamic curricula are effective when they integrate moral-spiritual principles with contemporary educational practices. However, the findings here also suggest that having formal documentation is not sufficient; effective implementation requires consistent teacher engagement and institutional support. This underscores the gap between policy and practice, which remains a critical challenge in many Islamic education contexts.

The role of teachers as moral exemplars was also evident in this study. Teachers not only transmitted Islamic knowledge but also modeled Islamic behavior through daily interactions with students. This finding supports Sulaiman and Rahman (2020), who argued that teacher role models are among the strongest predictors of successful character education in Islamic schools. Likewise, Raihani (2012) highlighted that teacher-student relationships, particularly in informal contexts, play a decisive role in moral internalization. By documenting how teachers in public primary schools embody Islamic values in both formal and informal settings, this study confirms the enduring importance of teacher agency in character development.

Finally, this study contributes novelty by focusing on the primary school level in a public context, an area underexplored in international scholarship. Much of the existing literature has examined Islamic education in secondary schools or pesantren (Idris & Mokodenseho, 2023; Idris et al., 2023). By analyzing how IRE is implemented in Indonesian public primary schools, this study offers new insights into how Islamic values are nurtured at a formative stage. Moreover, the research highlights context-specific challenges such as external social influences, which enriches the global discourse on Islamic education by bringing attention to the role of community environment in sustaining moral formation. This contribution is particularly relevant for policymakers and educators seeking to optimize Islamic education as a foundation for both personal and social development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Indonesian public primary schools plays a vital role in shaping students' Islamic character through both formal learning and informal practices. The integration of activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and religious assemblies, supported by teacher role models and school policies, has been shown to foster discipline, responsibility, and respect among students. Despite challenges such as limited instructional time and external social influences, the findings emphasize that IRE remains an effective framework for character formation at the foundational stage of education. The study contributes to the

international discourse on religious education by highlighting the significance of primary schools in cultivating moral values and by offering context-specific insights that can inform educators and policymakers in developing strategies for strengthening Islamic education in contemporary society.

AUHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Nesi Apriyadi conceived the research idea, designed the study, and conducted the primary data collection through classroom observations and interviews. Drafted the initial sections of the manuscript, including the introduction and methodology.

Sukarno analyzed and interpreted the data, developed the thematic coding framework, and contributed to the writing of the results and discussion sections. Assisted in reviewing relevant literature and aligning findings with international scholarship.

Aam Amaliyah provided overall supervision of the study, revised and refined the manuscript for academic rigor, and ensured coherence across all sections. Handled critical revisions based on feedback and prepared the article for submission to the journal.

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