



Religious Character Foundation in Independent Curriculum: The Strategic Role of Islamic Religious Education in Schools

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine the strategic role of Islamic Religious Education in shaping students' religious character through the implementation of the Independent Curriculum at the vocational high school level. The main focus lies in how religious values are instilled, internalized, and manifested in students' daily behavior through contextual IRE teaching, religious school programs, and the exemplary conduct of teachers. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with case studies. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that students' religious character development is supported by a synergy between practical IRE learning, daily religious routines, and a school culture that reinforces spiritual values. IRE teachers play a central role in embedding values of faith, morality, and tolerance. The implications highlight the urgency of developing a curriculum that integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions, offering a foundation for constructing a contextual and adaptive model of religious character education in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

The development of technology and the flow of global information have significantly impacted the behavior and morality of the younger generation in Indonesia. Phenomena such as violence in educational environments and increasing intolerance are indicators of a character crisis that require serious

attention (Muzayaroh, 2021). Data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission shows that throughout 2024, there were 2,057 complaints related to violations of children's rights, with 954 cases followed up to the termination stage (Latif, 2022; Sadiyah, 2022). In addition, a survey conducted by the SETARA Institute in 2023 revealed that 5% of high school students were categorized as actively intolerant, while another 0.6% were potentially exposed to radicalism. This condition shows that educational institutions have failed to instill strong religious character values (Astuti et al., 2024). Therefore, strategic efforts are needed to strengthen the role of Islamic Religious Education as a foundation for forming students' religious character in the Merdeka Curriculum era.

In the literature on character education, Islamic Religious Education is seen as the primary vehicle for the formation of noble morals and spiritual values of students. Research on Islamic religious education and the formation of religious character has been widely conducted in various approaches and institutional contexts. Basori et al (2023), in their research, highlighted how Salafi values are maintained through innovative management practices in Islamic boarding schools. This research underlines the importance of adapting religious values to modern management systems to remain relevant amidst the dynamics of contemporary education. Meanwhile, Jusubaidi et al (2024) developed a transformative Islamic religious education model at Pondok Modern Gontor, which integrates classical and modern teaching methods in forming the character of students who are inclusive, tolerant, and have a global perspective. On the other hand, Mukhibat et al (2024) focused their research on the development and evaluation of religious moderation curricula in higher education, emphasizing the importance of learning based on the values of tolerance and diversity in higher education environments.

The three studies show that Islamic religious education has a strategic role in instilling religious values in Islamic boarding schools, schools, and universities. However, there has not been much research that specifically examines the role of Islamic religious education in vocational schools in the context of the Independent Curriculum, especially in building the foundation of religious character through an integrative approach between formal learning, school culture, and teacher role models. Therefore, this study is here to fill this gap by examining the strategic contribution of Islamic religious education as the primary foundation for forming students' religious character in implementing the Independent Curriculum.

This study examines and analyzes the strategic role of Islamic Religious Education as a foundation for forming students' religious character within the framework of implementing the Independent Curriculum. The primary focus lies on how religious values can be internalized through an adaptive and applicable curriculum approach. From this background, the formulation of the problem developed in this study is as follows: What is the strategic role of Islamic Religious Education in forming students' religious character in implementing the

Independent Curriculum in schools? This question reflects academic concerns and the practical need for an Islamic Religious Education learning design that can bring Islamic values to life in the cognitive realm and in students' attitudes and real actions in everyday life, both at school and in the broader community.

This research is based on the assumption that the success of Islamic Religious Education in shaping religious character is primarily determined by the curriculum approach used and the learning methods educators apply. In the context of the Independent Curriculum, which provides space for experience-based learning and reflection, Islamic Religious Education has great potential to become the main instrument for character building that is relevant and down-to-earth. The hypothesis proposed is that the more strategic the role of Islamic Religious Education in the Independent Curriculum, the greater its contribution to forming students' religious character. This argument is reinforced by the reality in the field that students actively involved in applied religious learning tend towards more ethical, tolerant, and responsible behavior. Thus, the temporary answer to this research points to the importance of reconstructing Islamic Religious Education teaching methods to align with the spirit of Independent Learning and the needs of students' character in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site study design that focuses on implementing Islamic Religious Education in shaping students' religious character through the Independent Curriculum. The unit of analysis in this study is Islamic Religious Education learning activities and students' religious behavior at Al Hikmah Indramayu Vocational School. The selection of this location is based on the differences in institutional character between public schools and private madrasahs to obtain a more representative picture. This study examines how religious values are internalized through learning strategies in the context of the Independent Curriculum. The qualitative design was chosen because it can reveal informants' meaning and in-depth experiences related to the character education process, which cannot be explained quantitatively. This approach allows researchers to contextually explore the dynamics of internalizing religious values in the school environment naturally and comprehensively.

The sources of information in this study were obtained from key informants and supporters who were selected purposively. Key informants consisted of 4 Islamic Religious Education teachers who were actively teaching with a background of experience in implementing the Independent Curriculum. In addition, the principals of each institution (2 people) were also involved in obtaining strategic views on the policy and direction of strengthening religious character in schools. This study also involved 10 students from the upper grades (grades V and VI) selected based on considerations of striking religious behavior, both positively and negatively. The total number of informants was 16 people.

The informants were selected based on relevance, experience, and direct involvement in the Islamic Religious Education learning process. Information from various sources is expected to provide a triangulation of the strategic role of Islamic Religious Education in strengthening religious character in two different school contexts.

Tabel 1. Informan Data

Position	Education	Gender	Contribution to Research
Headmaster	S2	Lk	Explaining school policies in strengthening religious character and supporting the implementation of the Independent Curriculum Islamic education.
Curriculum Fields	S1	Pr	Providing information on planning, supervision, and evaluation of Islamic Religious Education learning and the integration of the Merdeka curriculum.
Student Affairs	S2	Lk	Explaining the role of character building through student activities related to religious values and students' religious attitudes.
School Secretary	S1	Pr	Providing data on the implementation of Islamic education learning support programs and documentation related to strengthening religious character.
Teacher	S1	Lk	Explaining teaching methods and implementation of Independent Curriculum-based learning in forming students' religious character.
Teacher	S2	Pr	Providing perspectives on the development of learning materials and approaches that effectively instill Islamic values.
Teacher	S1	Pr	Describes collaboration with Islamic Religious Education teachers in strengthening religious character and the influence of cross-subject learning.
Students	-	Lk & Pr	Revealing students' experiences in Islamic Religious Education learning and its impact on behavior, internalization of religious values, and attitudes of tolerance in the school environment..

Data were collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted semi-structured so informants could openly convey their views and experiences. In contrast, observations were conducted in classrooms and school religious activities such as congregational prayers, prayer readings, and Friday religious activities (Subakir, 2020; Fauzi et al., 2024). Documentation includes the Islamic Religious Education syllabus, character-strengthening programs, and student learning outcome records. Data analysis was conducted through the interactive analysis technique of the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation (data display), and drawing conclusions or verification. Data was reduced by filtering important information according to the research focus (Nasir, 2022). The data was then presented in the form of a thematic matrix to facilitate interpretation and then verified through

triangulation between informants and between methods. The analysis process took place simultaneously from the start of data collection until the end of the study to maintain the findings' consistency and validity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Integration of Religious Values in Islamic Religious Education Learning Runs Effectively Through a Contextual Approach

Based on the results of in depth interviews with Islamic Religious Education teachers and students at, it was found that integrating religious values in the learning process runs systematically and structured. Teachers use a contextual approach that allows students to understand religious teachings in everyday life situations. For example, teachers link material about honesty with student behavior in doing assignments and take advantage of everyday moments to instill values such as helping each other, respecting teachers, and responsibility. Students also said that the storytelling method, group discussions, and daily reflections made understanding and applying these values easier. This shows that Islamic Religious Education learning is not just about delivering religious material but also a process of internalizing values oriented towards character.

Table. 2 Visualization of Interview Results

Respondents	Gender	Position	Short Interview Excerpt
Principal	L	<i>Principal</i>	"We encourage all teachers, not just Islamic Religious Education teachers, to create a school environment with a religious nuance."
Teacher 1	L	<i>Islamic Religious Education</i>	"I always try to relate lessons to students' lives, so that religion is alive and feels close."
Teacher 2	P	<i>Islamic Religious Education</i>	"Through stories and discussions, students are more open and can judge what is right and wrong."
Student 1	L	Class XI	"Now I like to remind my friends if they forget to pray or don't pray."
Student 2	P	Class XII	"In religious studies, I feel like I learn a lot about how to be a good child."

From the interview results, it can be concluded that the Islamic Religious Education learning process has successfully created an interactive and reflective space for students. Teachers deliver religious material normatively and instill religious values through an approach relevant to students' daily lives. Student respondents also said that they know religious teachings in theory and feel motivated to apply them. The suitability between teachers' methods and students' learning experiences shows an effective integration between the curriculum and character values.

This finding shows that the success of integrating religious values in learning depends not only on teaching materials but also on the teacher's methods and approaches to guiding students. This interview proves that when

learning is contextualized with real life, students find it easier to understand and apply. This aligns with the theory of constructivism in education, where knowledge is formed from students' direct experiences and meanings. Thus, a lively, reflective, and participatory teaching approach has contributed to forming a strong religious character.

Institutional Support Becomes a Determining Factor for the Success of Religious Character Formation

The results of observations conducted in the school environment show that institutional factors have an important role in supporting the formation of religious character. Observations were made on daily school activities, from morning routines and class activities to weekly religious programs. It was found that religious habits such as praying together, reading the Qur'an, and performing congregational Duha prayers have become an inherent part of the school culture. In addition, teachers and principals appear active in providing examples in their attitudes and speech. Activities such as Friday Blessings, donation collection, and commemoration of Islamic holidays are routinely carried out and actively involve the entire school community.

Table 3. Visualization of Observation Results

School Activities	Execution Time	Field Observation
Morning prayer together	Every day 07:00 – 07:15 AM	Students line up neatly, read prayers and short surahs with teacher guidance.
Duha prayer in congregation	Every Wednesday 08:00 – 08:30 AM	The activity was carried out in the school prayer room, students looked solemn and orderly.
Blessed Friday	Every Friday After Friday Prayer (around 12:30 PM)	Teachers and students bring food to share, creating an atmosphere of sharing.
Islamic Holiday Ceremony	On scheduled Islamic calendar events Usually once every 1–2 months, during school hours	Schools actively commemorate Isra Mi'raj, Maulid Nabi, and others with an educational approach.
Qur'an Reading Routine	Every Monday and Thursday 07:15 – 07:30 AM	Students read short surahs in class with tajwid guidance from the teacher. Creates a disciplined and spiritual learning atmosphere.
Religious Motivation Session	Once a month Friday morning before class (07:00 – 07:30 AM)	Short lectures from invited ustadz or teachers that emphasize moral values, honesty, and mutual respect.
Tahfidz Program	Three times a week (Monday, Wednesday, Friday) After Duha prayer (08:30 – 09:00 AM)	Students memorize short surahs, with periodic evaluations by Islamic Religious Education teachers.

Field observations confirm that the existence of a structured religious program is an important support in efforts to shape students' religious character. Not only routine activities, schools also instill religious values through symbols, habits, and a religious environment. This is reinforced by direct examples from teachers and principals who actively provide examples in daily behavior. This observation proves that a religious school atmosphere is possible if there is synergy between programs, supervision, and role models.

Observation findings strengthen the theory of school culture, which states that an educational environment full of values and symbols plays a significant role in shaping student behavior. When religious culture is taught and practiced consistently, these values will be embedded in students. Habituation is the key to internalizing values. Thus, institutional support and religious programs in schools have proven to be important foundations in strengthening religious-based character education.

Islamic education can Foster Attitudes of Tolerance and Social Awareness among Students

School documentation in the form of annual work programs, reports of religious activities, and visual documentation such as photos of activities and minutes of meetings show the school's consistency in implementing programs that support the formation of religious character. One of the leading programs recorded in the document is the "Islamic Moral Week," held at the end of each semester. In this program, students are involved in the call to prayer competition, short surah memorization, and Islamic drama with the theme of tolerance and noble morals. In addition, student development reports that include aspects of spiritual attitudes are also a concern in periodic evaluations by homeroom teachers and Islamic Religious Education teachers.

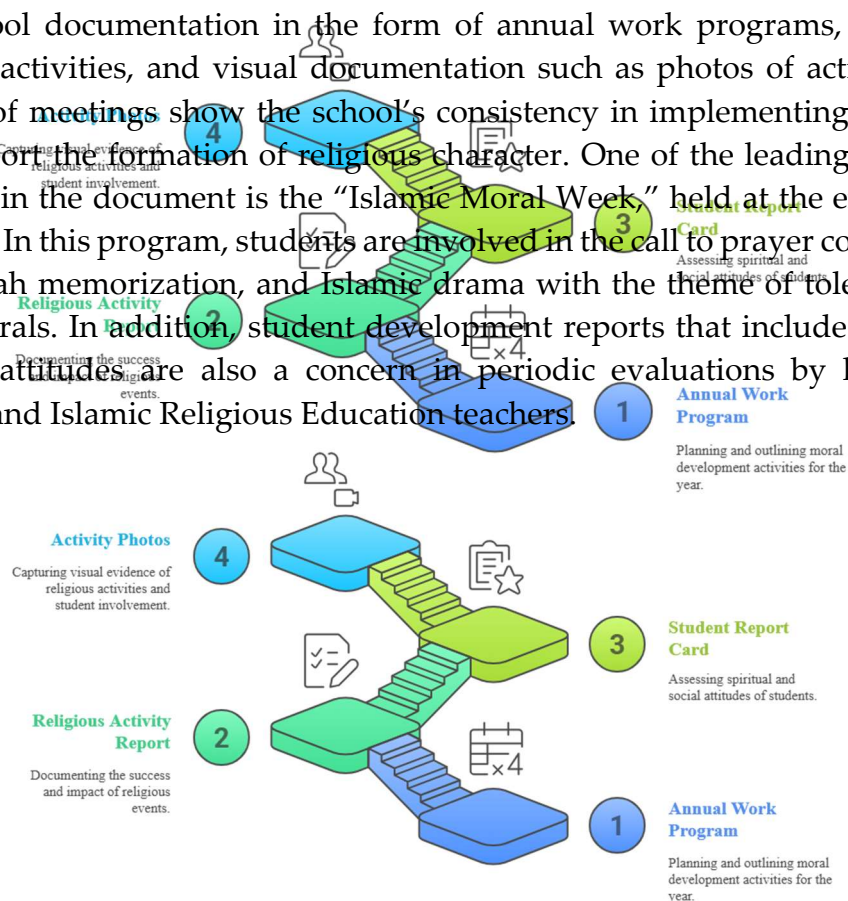


Figure 1. Building Religious Character

Documentation data shows that schools have good intentions and neatly documented plans and implementations to strengthen religious character. The

existence of work programs and evaluations of spiritual attitudes in student report cards proves that religious character has become an integral part of educational assessment. In addition, visual documentation clarifies the active participation of students in activities that build morals and attitudes of tolerance, especially in everyday social life. Complete and ongoing documentation is strong evidence that strengthening religious character is not just a discourse but has become a consistently applied system. In a character-based evaluative approach, documents are not just archives but reflections of the culture and direction of education. This finding supports the character-based curriculum approach, which holistically places moral-spiritual aspects as holistic indicators of educational success.

Discussion

The findings from the interview results showing that the integration of religious values in Islamic Religious Education learning runs effectively through a contextual approach have significant implications in the world of education because they illustrate that the success of religious character education is not only determined by the content of the curriculum (Erdoğan, 2020; Taufik, 2020). But also by the teacher's ability to deliver material in an applicable, meaningful, and relevant way to students' daily lives, which ultimately encourages students not only to understand religious teachings cognitively but also to bring these values to life in concrete actions such as honesty, responsibility, and politeness at school and outside of school, so that the contextual approach applied by Islamic Religious Education teachers can be used as an ideal model in delivering (Basori et al., 2023; Mukhibat et al., 2024). Islamic religious education that is not dogmatic but transformational and is able to answer the challenges of an increasingly complex era that demands authentic religious character in the social life of modern society (Jusubaidi et al., 2024).

The reason why the contextual approach is practical in forming students' religious character as the results of the interviews in this study can be explained through the theory of constructivism which emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when students are able to link new knowledge with experiences they have had and are able to reflect the values of religious teachings into real situations they face, so that the method used by Islamic Religious Education teachers that combines life narratives, open discussions, and value reflections makes the learning process more than just a process of transferring information, but becomes a medium for internalization and character transformation, because students will find it easier to accept and practice religious teachings that come from personal understanding and social emotions compared to conventional methods that only focus on memorizing material, so it can be concluded that the success of forming religious character is closely related to the learning approach that provides space for exploration and real value experience (Kosim et al., 2024).

The implications of the observation findings that show that the success of

the formation of students' religious character is highly dependent on the institutional support of the school confirm that character education is not enough to rely on Islamic Religious Education teachers alone, but requires an educational ecosystem that supports structurally and culturally, because through observations of routine activities such as congregational prayers, morning prayers, and the Friday Blessing program (Muzayaroh, 2021; Taja et al., 2021). It is seen that the internalization of religious values will be more effective if applied collectively by all components of the school, starting from the principal, cross-subject teachers, education personnel, to the active role of the students themselves, and this proves that the success of religious character is the fruit of a maintained and sustainable institutional culture, so that schools need to position themselves not only as academic institutions but also as agents of moral and spiritual culture, which integrate religious values into the system, rhythm, and practice of daily life in the school environment (Sadiah, 2022; Mahmud et al., 2023).

The reason why institutional support has a significant influence in the formation of students' religious character, as depicted in the observation results, can be explained through the approach of school culture theory which states that values and norms that are developed and maintained together in the school environment will create a social atmosphere that influences individual behavior in it indirectly but profoundly (Alimah, 2020). So that when religious programs are implemented routinely, religious symbols are maintained, and exemplary behavior is shown by the entire school community, then psychologically students will feel that religious values are part of an everyday life, not something foreign or just a formality of lessons, because social involvement in religious practices creates a non-verbal learning space that forms students' moral awareness through repetition, exemplary behavior, and togetherness, which ultimately results in a religious character that grows from habits and the environment, not just from doctrine (Syarnubi et al., 2021; Jusubaidi et al., 2024). Islamic Religious Education Can Foster Attitudes of Tolerance and Social Awareness among Students.

The implications of the documentation results showing that Islamic religious education can foster attitudes of tolerance and social awareness through planned programs and evaluations are that schools have a strategic role in making religious values an instrument for forming social cohesion amidst cultural and belief diversity (Subaidi, 2020). Where Islamic Religious Education is not only a tool for personal spiritual development, but also as a driving force for instilling values of togetherness, mutual respect, and concern for others, and documentary evidence such as reports of Islamic Morals Week activities, report cards that assess spiritual aspects, and photos of social activities prove that the Merdeka curriculum can be translated into holistic and contextual learning practices so that Islamic religious education functions as a social glue that can prevent moral disintegration and build a foundation for sustainable harmony in

school life and the wider community (Sulhan & Hakim, 2023).

The reason why school documentation showing the implementation of Islamic religious education in the form of real activities can foster an attitude of tolerance and social awareness is because the religious values taught in Islamic Religious Education become more meaningful when concretized in the form of collective actions rooted in shared awareness, such as donation activities, social work, commemoration of religious holidays, and Islamic dramas with the theme of tolerance (Becker et al., 2021; Aqool, 2022; Obaid et al., 2024). Where student participation in these activities builds a practical understanding of the importance of diversity, empathy, and social responsibility, and provides direct experience in living together peacefully, which cannot be obtained only from classroom learning, because through these activities students not only understand values, but also practice them in the community, which then strengthens the understanding that Islamic values are truly universal values that encourage peace, solidarity, and respect for differences (Faisol, 2023; Qushwa, 2024).

This research's contribution lies in strengthening the argument that Islamic religious education plays a strategic role in shaping students' religious character through a contextual approach, a supportive school culture, and teacher role models. This research provides empirical evidence that integrating religious values into the Merdeka curriculum in vocational high schools can enhance students' tolerance, responsibility, and social piety. These findings enrich theoretical and practical studies on the effectiveness of a holistic approach to Islamic values-based character education in the era of adaptive curricula.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the formation of religious character in schools is not enough to rely only on Islamic Religious Education teaching materials, but needs to be strengthened through a contextual approach by teachers, support for school culture, and integration of religious activities in students' daily lives, so that religious values can be internalized effectively and sustainably; This confirms that the strategic role of Islamic education in the Independent Curriculum is very important in forming religious, tolerant, and moral students, as well as becoming the foundation of an inclusive and transformative national character, but this study has limitations in the scope of locations and informants that do not represent the diversity of social and cultural contexts widely, therefore, further research is recommended to be conducted comparatively in various regions and levels of education, in order to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of Islamic education in forming religious and tolerant characters amidst the diversity of cultures and beliefs of students.

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