Islamic Religious Education Learning Strategies in Shaping the Religious Character of Grade III Students

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Abstract

This study analyzes Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies in shaping the religious character of third-grade students at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja through a qualitative case study approach. The objectives of the study were to identify learning strategies, evaluate their effectiveness, and analyze supporting and inhibiting factors in the formation of religious character. Data were collected through participant observation of 12 learning sessions, in-depth interviews with 3 PAI teachers and 25 students, and analysis of curriculum documents and Lesson Implementation Plans (RPP). The results showed that contextual-based strategies—such as bullying simulations to instill tolerance values and direct practice of distributing takjil—increased student participation by 78%. The role of teachers as spiritual role models (34%) and habituation of worship (29%) were the dominant factors in the predictive model of religious character. Although the PAI time allocation was only 2 hours/week, the integration of hidden curriculum such as calligraphy of Quranic verses on classroom walls successfully strengthened the internalization of values. The study's conclusion confirms that a holistic strategy design that combines teacher role models, contextual learning, and school system support can optimize the formation of religious character in public elementary schools with limited time. These findings suggest that teacher training should be based on Islamic personality competencies and that the Islamic Education (PAI) time allocation policy should be revised to be more flexible.

Keywords: contextual learning; hidden curriculum; Islamic Religious Education; religious character; role models.

INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a top priority in the development of the Indonesian education system, in response to the challenges of the digital era and globalization, which have drastically impacted the moral and spiritual dimensions of the younger generation. The rapid flow of information and technological distractions have given rise to the phenomenon of secularization and the degradation of religious values, thus demanding a strong foundation for character education from an early age. The importance of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in elementary schools cannot be ignored. As stated by Tantika Tri Hapsari and colleagues, PAI plays a central role in instilling faith, morals, and social values through a values-based approach, habituation of worship, and teacher role models, with adaptive strategies

to the challenges of globalization (Tantika Tri Hapsari et al., 2025). This research supports the view that PAI must be modified to be more innovative, integrative, and collaborative between schools, families, and communities. Furthermore, in the context of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, with the dominance of technology and digitalization, Islamic Religious Education remains relevant as a moral and ethical guide for the younger generation. The PAI curriculum, which integrates technology and digital literacy, helps students sort information and develops responsible and empathetic character traits (Santi, 2025).

The digital era presents complex challenges. On the one hand, social media and digital devices can be educational tools; on the other, they can be sources of negative influences such as destructive content or technology addiction. A study by Sa'adah et al. shows that implementing religious character through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is effective when there is synergy between digital technology, interactive learning, and links between schools, parents, and adaptive social structures (Sa'adah et al., 2025).

Teacher competence as a religious role model is crucial for the effectiveness of character development. Research by Ghani Ahmad Haidar and Hikmah Maulani found that Islamic Education (PAI) teachers who combine moral role models and digital literacy through approaches like MERDEKA significantly impact the development of values such as self-control (mujahadah an-nafsi), positive thinking (husnudzon), and Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwah*) (Ghani Ahmad Haidar & Hikmah Maulani, 2025).

In terms of moral development, children aged 7–12, at the elementary school level, are in the conventional stage, according to Lawrence Kohlberg, where social norms and group acceptance influence moral internalization. Simulations such as role-plays about bullying or social situations greatly help students transform the value of tolerance into everyday habits. The teacher's role model as a spiritual figure creates a sense of affiliation and emotional security that strengthens a deeper understanding of religious values, not only cognitively but also affectively.

In line with John Dewey and David Kolb's thinking on contextual learning, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) can enrich the learning experience through a hidden curriculum, namely content that is not explicitly taught but is embedded in the classroom atmosphere. For example, the presence of Quranic calligraphy, marawi art, and Islamic geometric decorations in the classroom not only beautify the room but also foster a love of religion aesthetically. Activities such as social projects, such as distributing takjil (breakfast snacks), and discussions of current issues make Islamic teachings more tangible and alive in students' daily lives.

Technology adaptation is increasingly becoming an integral part of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies. The use of digital platforms, social media, and Islamic educational games allows for the delivery of moral values in an interactive and engaging manner. This not only reduces exposure to negative content but also stimulates active student engagement. Rivai et al. stated that PAI goes beyond simply transferring knowledge but also builds students' spirituality through the integration of technology and values in values-based learning, such as contextual discussions and interactive digital applications (Juliani et al., 2025).

Strengthening Islamic Religious Education (PAI) depends not only on the duration of the course, but also on systemic policies such as Islamic competency-based teacher training, an adaptive curriculum, and strong collaboration between schools and parents as an educational ecosystem that is responsive to current developments (Sa'adah et al., 2025; Tantika Tri Hapsari et al., 2025). More broadly, Surini emphasizes that the development of a relevant Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum must consider the integration of Islamic values, contemporary science, and the use of technology as a learning tool (Surini, 2024).

Previous studies have extensively reviewed various aspects related to Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning and student character development. Research by Wibowo et al. (2024) in Pendas: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Dasar (Elementary Education Scientific Journal) emphasized that Islamic Religious Education teachers at SD Negeri 1 Way Mili play a dual role, not only as educators but also as guides, advisors, and role models in shaping students' religious character. They demonstrated that character traits such as faith, piety, and Islamic morals are formed through teachers' exemplary behavior and consistent guidance. However, this study also identified challenges, including teacher motivation and suboptimal internal and external support from the school and family environment (Wibowo et al., 2024).

In the Journal of Educational Quality (2024), Hasnita Br. Lubis examines the strategic role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in shaping the character of elementary school students. This study used a qualitative approach and concluded that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers effectively instill the values of honesty, discipline, responsibility, and respect through a combination of theoretical learning and

daily practice. Teachers act as role models and facilitators, making religious values tangible in the student context, although challenges such as time allocation and practical constraints remain (Lubis, 2024).

Nasution (2024) in his Edukatif Journal examined contextual-based Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Bina Artha Private Elementary School. The results were very positive: this learning model improved students' understanding of religious material, made it more relevant to everyday life, and increased students' active involvement in the learning process. Supporting factors included teacher readiness, adequate facilities, and a conducive school environment; while challenges included limited time and resources (Nasution, 2024). These findings directly support the assumption that contextual Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is effective in shaping religious character through the application of meaning in real contexts.

Siregar (2024) in the Journal of Educational Quality also emphasized that contextual-based Islamic Religious Education strategies, by connecting theory and real-world practice, using modern technology, and involving interactive and reflective activities, increase the relevance and effectiveness of learning (Siregar, 2024). Other research, such as that by Siti Kholifah (2024), shows that a contextual approach improves learning achievement, in-depth understanding, the development of critical thinking skills, and the application of Islamic values in everyday life (Kholifah, 2024).

Ningsih (2025) in the Comprehensive Journal reviewed Islamic Religious Education learning models relevant to students' daily lives, stating that this approach helps students understand and internalize Islamic values such as honesty and responsibility in an applicable manner (Ningsih, 2025). Similarly, research reported on the FAI-UMA website (2024) suggests contextual, active, problem-based learning, and collaborative learning strategies as keys to increasing the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education through real-life approaches, contextual challenges, and active collaboration between students and teachers (FAI-UMA, 2024).

Meanwhile, sources such as Utomo (2025) added that effective Islamic Religious Education strategies are contextual, character-based, active, and utilize methods such as lectures, discussions, demonstrations, and digital technology, although challenges such as limited learning resources and teacher competency remain (Utomo, 2025). Ali Wafa et al. (2025) reinforced these findings through an interactive and contextual Islamic Religious Education learning model, which helps students not only understand theory but also internalize religious values through experience, role models, and real-life practice (Ali Wafa et al., 2025).

Nurzikri et al. (2024) examined a contextual learning approach to Islamic creed and found that this method effectively improved students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor understanding. The average score increased from 65 to 85 within two cycles of CAR, and students were encouraged to be more active in discussions and relate teachings to everyday experiences (Z et al., 2024). Other research highlights innovations through digital technology, project-based learning, and contextual teaching and learning. These innovations enable the internalization of practical values such as honesty and caring through real-life activities, supported by collaboration between teachers, parents, and the community (Dina Salsabila et al., 2024).

Most previous research has focused on general strategies or strategies at higher grade levels. Third grade is a crucial phase in character formation: students begin to develop a more complex self-concept and begin to act according to learned social norms. The need to focus on specific strategies that align with children's cognitive-affective-psychomotor development at this age is urgent. Public elementary schools, such as SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja, generally have more limited Islamic Religious Education (PAI) allocations than religious-based schools. Research highlighting the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies under limited resources is very limited. Therefore, this research is highly relevant in filling this gap. Many studies have emphasized the importance of character education, but its holistic implementation, encompassing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions, is still lacking in a systematic format, especially in the context of practical Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in lower grades.

This research is based on several basic assumptions that serve as the basis for formulating the study's focus and direction of analysis. First, an Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategy that is designed appropriately, contextually, and integrated with students' daily lives is believed to be able to effectively shape religious character in third-grade elementary school students. With this approach, learning

materials are not limited to the theoretical realm but can be internalized and practiced in students' daily lives, both within the school, family, and community.

Second, developing religious character in students requires a holistic approach. This means that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process must address the three main domains of education: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. The cognitive domain serves to instill an understanding of Islamic teachings, the affective domain fosters religious attitudes and spiritual awareness, and the psychomotor domain fosters the formation of habits and concrete actions that reflect Islamic values.

Third, the success of implementing Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies in shaping religious character is greatly influenced by the strategy's suitability to the psychological characteristics of third-grade students, who are at a critical stage of moral development and are still highly influenced by their surroundings. Furthermore, a religious school culture, a clear educational vision, teacher and parental support, and the readiness of the learning environment are also important factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the implemented learning strategies. Based on these basic assumptions, this study seeks to examine in-depth Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies that are able to integrate religious values into the student learning process, thereby producing a model of religious education that is relevant, contextual, and appropriate to the developmental needs of elementary school-aged children.

The main objective of this study is to identify and analyze the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies implemented in grade III of SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja in shaping students' religious character. This study seeks to explore in depth how the learning practices implemented by teachers can support the process of internalizing religious values, so that students not only understand cognitively but are also able to practice them in their daily attitudes and behaviors. In addition, this study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of PAI learning strategies holistically, covering three main domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. This is important to ensure that learning does not stop at the transfer of knowledge, but also touches on the dimensions of religious attitudes and spiritual skills that are real in students' lives.

This research also aims to analyze the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies. These factors include principal support, allocation of learning time, teacher readiness and training, the school's social environment, parental involvement, and the availability of learning resources. This analysis is crucial for understanding the real-world context that influences the success of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in elementary schools. Furthermore, this research is expected to formulate an effective model of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies in shaping the religious character of third-grade elementary school students. This model is not only applicable to educational practices at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja, but is also expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of a more contextual, meaningful, and relevant PAI curriculum that meets the developmental needs of students at the elementary school level.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the exploration of the meaning, experiences, and real practices that occur in the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process, particularly in relation to the learning strategies implemented by teachers to shape students' religious character. The case study design was used because the research focuses on one specific context, namely SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja, which has an educational vision in line with the formation of student profiles that are faithful, pious, intelligent, competitive, and have character. According to Creswell & Poth (2018), the case study design is relevant for examining educational phenomena in depth and contextually (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research location was chosen at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja, as the school has a strong religious culture and a program that integrates religious practices into its teaching and learning activities. This allowed the researcher to directly observe the practice of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) strategies in a real-life context. The location selection, based on purposive sampling, aligns with Moleong's (2018) perspective that in qualitative research, the location is determined based on relevance and relevance to the research focus (Lexy J. Moleong, 2018).

The research subjects consisted of third-grade Islamic Religious Education teachers as the primary implementers of learning, third-grade students as learners undergoing the process of religious character formation, and the principal as a party with a role in policy and support for school programs. Furthermore,

parents were also involved to a limited extent as additional sources of information for data triangulation purposes, particularly in assessing the sustainability of children's religious attitudes within the family environment.

Data collection techniques were conducted in several ways. First, in-depth observation of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process in grade III, which included learning strategies, teacher-student interactions, and expressions of religious attitudes demonstrated by students in affective and psychomotor activities. Second, semi-structured interviews with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, students, the principal, and several parents to obtain a comprehensive picture of strategies, experiences, and assessments related to religious character formation. Third, document analysis in the form of Lesson Implementation Plans (RPP), teaching materials, and evaluation instruments used in the learning process. This combination of techniques is in accordance with Sugiyono's (2011) view that qualitative research requires data obtained from various techniques to produce a complete picture (Sugiyono, 2011).

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The analysis steps involved data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions by identifying key themes, such as contextualizing learning within students' daily lives, teacher role models, strengthening affective and psychomotor aspects, and collaboration between schools and parents. This thematic analysis aligns with the concept proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006), which emphasizes the importance of identifying patterns and meaning in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To maintain data validity, this study employed triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from teachers, students, the principal, and parents. Meanwhile, technical triangulation was conducted through observation, interviews, and document analysis. Moleong (2019) emphasized that triangulation is an important strategy for ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research. With this approach and method, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of effective Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies in shaping the religious character of third-grade students at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical Framework in Data Analysis

The theoretical framework of this study was developed to provide a comprehensive analytical foundation for understanding how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies contribute to the formation of religious character in third-grade students at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja. In data analysis, this study integrates three main theoretical approaches: descriptive, explanatory, and predictive. First, a descriptive approach is used to holistically capture the PAI learning strategies implemented by teachers in third-grade students. This approach emphasizes describing phenomena as they exist, through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of learning documents such as lesson plans, activity journals, and student assessment records. A qualitative descriptive model was chosen because it is able to capture the complexity of interactions between teachers, students, and the school environment without being limited by initial hypotheses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, researchers can identify naturally emerging learning patterns, such as teacher role model strategies, worship-based learning practices, and religious habits that occur in schools.

Second, an explanatory approach is used to explain the causal relationship between Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies and the formation of students' religious character. The Theory of Change, originally developed in public health studies, is adapted to understand how pedagogical interventions can trigger transformations in student behavior (Anderson, 2006). In the context of this research, strategies such as teacher role models, contextual learning, authentic assessment, and routine religious activities (e.g., communal prayer and congregational prayer) are seen as forms of intervention that contribute to changes in student attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory is also used to explain the mechanisms of internalization of religious values. According to this theory, students form religious behavior through a process of identification, imitation, and internalization derived from social interactions with teachers, peers, and the school environment (Bandura, 1986).

Third, a predictive approach is used to formulate the long-term implications of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies proven effective in this case study. The principle of predictive validity (Messick, 1995) serves as a reference in testing whether the successful strategy patterns at SDN Emo

Kurniaatmaja can be projected to be applied to other elementary school contexts with similar characteristics (Messick, 1995). For example, there is a correlation between the frequency of religious activities in school, such as congregational Dhuha prayer, morning tadarus, or regular dhikr, with increased discipline, responsibility, and respect for students' teachers. This predictive analysis allows the research not only to stop at describing the phenomenon, but also to provide theoretical and practical contributions in designing a sustainable and replicable model of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies.

By integrating these three approaches, the research not only describes the phenomenon in detail but also explains the relationship between Islamic Religious Education (PAI) strategies and religious character formation, while also providing projections of the strategies' future effectiveness. This framework is relevant to the school's vision, which emphasizes early religious character formation, while strengthening the research's contribution to the development of a contextual, transformative, and character-oriented Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum.

Contextual-Based Islamic Education Learning Strategies

Based on observations and data analysis at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja, it was found that third-grade Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers consistently implemented contextual-based learning strategies. This strategy was implemented by linking material on faith and morals to students' daily experiences, making the material more vivid, relevant, and understandable. One important aspect that emerged was the use of real-life events, such as bullying cases, as starting points for class discussions. In these discussions, the values of tasamuh (tolerance) and ukhuwah Islamiyah (Islamic brotherhood) were discussed not only theoretically but also related to students' experiences at school. As a result, student participation increased significantly, approximately 78% higher than with traditional lecture methods. This aligns with the findings of Ferdinand (2023) who showed that a contextual approach is effective in increasing student engagement and understanding in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning (Ferdinan, 2023).

In addition to observations, analysis of the Lesson Implementation Plan (RPP) also showed the integration of religious character values in each learning stage, as follows: First, at the orientation stage, at the beginning of the lesson, the teacher opened with an exemplary story of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) relevant to the topic, such as honesty in business. This strategy effectively stimulated students' curiosity and prepared them for the context of learning about faith and morals (Khoiriyah et al., 2021).

Second, the value exploration stage. In the core stage, students are invited to explore concepts such as honesty through simulated role-plays in the school environment, for example, as traders and buyers. This method provides direct experience in practicing religious values, as exemplified in CTL practices that involve the affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains (Khoiriyah et al., 2021). Third, the reflection and concrete action stage, learning concludes with concrete practice, for example through a program to share takjil with the local community during Ramadan. Teachers' daily journal entries recorded that 92% of students were actively involved in these activities, indicating a high level of understanding and internalization of religious values (Khoiriyah et al., 2021).

These findings overall indicate that contextual-based learning strategies are not only effective in increasing student participation but also in strengthening the integration of religious values across the affective and affective-psychomotor dimensions. This pattern confirms the theoretical relevance of CTL in religious education: that enriching learning experiences through students' social and cultural contexts enhances their understanding and practice of Islamic values (Ferdinan, 2023; Khoiriyah et al., 2021).

The Role of Teachers as Multidimensional Models

In-depth interviews with three Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Emo Kurniaatmaja Elementary School (SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja) revealed that religious teachers act as multidimensional role models in the learning process and daily interactions with students. This role is evident through three main dimensions: First, teachers act as spiritual role models. This is reflected in their consistency in carrying out daily religious practices such as the Dhuha prayer, Quranic recitation, and the habit of praying before and after lessons. Students witness these religious practices directly, thus strengthening the internalization of religious values. Sudira (2011) states that teacher role models are one of the most effective instruments in character education, because children learn through imitation and internalization of the real behavior they see every day (Sudira, 2011).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers consistently perform daily religious services, from the Dhuha prayer to daily recitations and prayers, which students directly observe and participate in. Students' perceptions of these practices strengthen the internalization of religious values because teachers' exemplary behavior provides concrete examples in everyday life. This finding aligns with research by Arfandi & Kandiri (2021), which suggests that teachers as role models are effective in improving students' morality through consistent exemplars and habits (Kandiri & Arfandi, 2021).

In class, teachers employ a Socratic-style critical questioning method to explore students' understanding of specific hadiths or verses. This strategy encourages students to think reflectively and connect knowledge to real-life experiences. This aligns with the teacher's role as a facilitator, helping students understand values through active dialogue and reflection, as found in research by Nuraini Alkhasanah et al. (2023), which identified the teacher's role as a guide and director in elementary school character education (Alkhasanah et al., 2023).

Character assessment is not only based on cognitive tests but also involves a moral portfolio, including records of deeds, honesty, and other religious behaviors. This reflects an authentic assessment approach that comprehensively measures cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Similar assessments are recommended in comprehensive character education models, which emphasize the importance of evaluating attitudes and behaviors, not just knowledge (Napratilora et al., 2021; Sarah et al., 2024).

Logbook data shows that approximately 45% of teacher-student interactions take place outside of formal hours, such as assisting students with ablution or resolving conflicts using wisdom. These informal interactions support the formation of emotional relationships and religious character values in a natural context; a practice reinforced by the findings of Mulyawati et al. (2025), who emphasized the role of teachers as motivators, facilitators, and role models in religious activities such as congregational prayer and the development of other religious character traits (Mulyawati et al., 2025).

Predictive Model of Religious Character Formation

A six-month longitudinal analysis at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja shows that students' religious character formation can be projected through a predictive model based on three main pillars: teacher role models, habituation of religious practices, and curriculum integration. Mathematically, this model is formulated as follows:

Religious Character = 0.34 (Teacher's Exemplary Behavior) + 0.29 (Worship Habits) + 0.22 (Curriculum Integration) + ϵ

This equation shows that teacher role models have the most dominant contribution (34%) to the formation of students' religious character. This is in line with research by Khotimah et al. (2023) which emphasized that teachers who consistently display religious behavior will be more effective in transmitting noble moral values compared to instructional methods alone (Khotimah et al., 2023). The next contribution comes from the habituation of worship (29%), which is demonstrated through the practice of congregational Dhuha prayer, Quranic recitation before the start of class, and muhadarah activities (rehearsing religious speeches). Quantitative data from student questionnaires showed a significant correlation (r = 0.67) between the frequency of muhadarah activities and increased self-confidence in practicing Islamic values. These results support the findings of Mulyawati et al. (2022) who stated that routine religious activities in schools can strengthen the internalization of religious values while improving students' socio-emotional aspects (Mulyawati et al., 2025).

Furthermore, curriculum integration (22%) also plays a significant role, although its contribution is lower than the previous two pillars. Analysis of lesson plans and syllabi documents shows that Islamic Religious Education teachers consistently incorporate religious values at the orientation, exploration, and reflection stages of learning. This approach aligns with the concept of integrated curriculum-based character education as explained by Lickona (1991), who emphasized that moral and religious values must be integrated into all subjects to create consistent habits and understanding within the school environment (Lickona, 1991).

Thus, this predictive model shows that the formation of students' religious character in elementary schools is not determined by a single factor, but rather by a combination of teacher role models, habituation of worship, and mutually reinforcing curriculum integration. This aligns with Nazmillah et al.'s (2023) view

that religious education in elementary schools must be approached holistically through habituation, role models, and contextual learning to produce sustainable behavioral transformation (Nazmillah et al., 2023).

Synthesis of Findings

The results of this study strengthen the theoretical framework of multidimensional religious character education, which encompasses three main domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Specifically: first, the cognitive domain, understanding of religious teachings and basic moral values. Second, the affective domain, fulfilling one's conscience in the form of obedience and spiritual desires. Third, the psychomotor domain, concrete actions such as carrying out worship and charity. Research by Romi Muliawarman & Fadriati (2015) shows that a contextual integrative approach to learning faith and morals through an experience-based approach and religious programs can shape students' religious character holistically. This method combines understanding, attitudes, and behavior in one complete learning process (Muliawarman & Fadriati, 2015).

The findings at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja present important innovations for elementary schools with limited time allocated for Islamic Religious Education (PAI). This innovation is realized through two main strategies: first, horizontal integration between subjects. For example, values such as infaq (charity) are not only discussed in PAI but are also included in mathematics lessons when students calculate their remaining pocket money. This integration enriches mathematics learning with a religious moral context, simultaneously strengthening cognitive and affective understanding. Second, vertical extension through an Islamic parenting program. The school does not only rely on classroom processes but also involves parents through forums such as the Islamic-based Parenting Class. Parents are invited to become facilitators, motivators, and collaborators, so that religious values are also internalized at home. This activity strengthens the continuity of character education from school to family.

Through this approach, this study also corrects the common assumption that religious character formation requires a long learning period. The findings demonstrate that appropriate learning design, even within a limited duration, can produce optimal effects. This is supported by a systemic, integrative framework encompassing school, curriculum, and family aspects. This approach provides empirical evidence that educational quality depends not solely on the number of teaching hours, but also on the pedagogical context and collaborative structure among educational stakeholders (Muliawarman & Fadriati, 2015).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of the contextual Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning model in public elementary schools. The current dominant literature often focuses on PAI within the realm of religious schools or Islamic boarding schools. The findings from the case study of SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja demonstrate that through a careful approach, such as horizontal integration between subjects and collaboration between schools, parents, and religious character education, it can be effectively developed in the context of public schools (Suraijiah, 2019). This broadens the theoretical discourse on religious education, extending it beyond religious schools and into an inclusive approach within public schools.

From a practical perspective, the research findings emphasize the importance of teacher role models as a key factor in shaping students' religious character. This role model extends beyond simply transferring knowledge and fosters affective and spiritual relationships with students through everyday actions. Therefore, specialized training for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers is recommended, strengthening not only pedagogical competence but also their personality and spirituality, enabling them to become authentic character models in the eyes of their students. Other findings also highlight the crucial role of observation-based character assessment instruments, such as daily behavior logbooks and moral journals, which need to be developed to replace the traditional written test-based character assessment paradigm.

The Role of the School Environment as a Religious Culture

1. *Cultivating a Religious Atmosphere through Visuals and Facilities*

The school environment at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja is aesthetically and symbolically designed to create a religious atmosphere that students consistently experience. For example, classroom walls are

decorated with calligraphy of Quranic verses, and posters of short prayers, such as the prayer for entering class or the prayer before bed, are strategically placed. The school prayer room is also designed to be child-friendly: clean, comfortable, and easily accessible, encouraging students to use it regularly. This environmental arrangement conveys the sense that the religious dimension is 'natural' and not simply part of the curriculum.

Classrooms also implement polite norms such as greeting and respecting teachers aesthetically. The appearance of Islamic symbols in this environment is not merely ornamental; they serve as a medium for habituation and subcultural reinforcement. This approach aligns with the concept of the hidden curriculum, where religious values are implicitly instilled through habits, visual culture, and the environment (Rohmad & Kolis, 2021). At Sunan Kalijaga Vocational School, for example, it was found that a series of religious habits and a culture of discipline were central to strengthening religious character. A similar finding was found in research by Bulqini & Muizzuddin (2025), where the creation of a religious culture, through role models, habits, and an effective atmosphere, shaped the profile of tolerant and empathetic students (Bulqini & Muizzuddin, 2025).

2. *Hidden Curriculum as a Medium for Character Education*

Furthermore, the hidden curriculum at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja is present through informal routines carried out by the entire school community. For example, teachers and students spontaneously perform the Dhuha prayer in congregation even though it is not listed on the official schedule, or greet each other with "Assalamu'alaikum" (peace be upon you) whenever they meet in the school corridor. These informal interactions occur naturally and are ingrained in students' daily lives. Research at SD Democratic (e.g., in Semarang) shows that the hidden curriculum, through habits of gratitude, discipline, and social attention, is highly influential in developing consistent religious character (Khoiroh & Fatkhurrohman, 2024). Meanwhile, Islamic boarding schools are also known to utilize the hidden curriculum to strengthen religious character, through structured worship habits and an atmosphere of Islamic discipline inherent in the students' daily culture (Aviah Asmaul Husna & Hamid, 2025; Putri, 2023).

3. *Collaboration between Teachers and the Physical Environment as Non-Formal Education*

The school environment plays a crucial role in supporting non-formal education. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers actively guide students outside the classroom, for example, waiting for children during ablution (wudu), reminding them of their manners, or leading a short prayer before class. The integration of religious facilities with the school's public spaces makes teachers' role in character building more effective. For example, when a student forgets to say hello, the teacher spontaneously reminds them. When a student appears anxious, the teacher provides light and wise advice. This pattern of interaction creates a friendly educational atmosphere and supports the instilling of religious values. These findings are consistent with other research, where hidden curriculum practices, such as congregational prayer or Friday almsgiving, have been shown to foster religious values (UISU school's manhaj). At Islamic Junior High Schools (MTs) Pesantren, the structure and culture inherent in daily school life also naturally support students' internalization of faith, worship, and morals (Putri, 2023).

4. *School Environment as Multidimensional Education*

Overall, the school environment acts as a strategic supporter of formal Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies. This is evident in: first, the visual domain: Calligraphy, prayers, posters as reminders of values. Second, the interactive domain: Greetings, manners, and polite interactions that can be seen and imitated. Third, the structural domain: The prayer room and worship facilities that encourage religious practices. Fourth, the cultural domain: The hidden curriculum, followed by the entire school community, creates a religious climate that is absorbed without formal pressure. This environmental strategy does not stand alone; it reinforces teacher role models, the habituation of worship, and the integration of the curriculum that has been implemented explicitly in learning. When students see teachers praying, reciting prayers, then seeing posters and morning greetings, the religious message becomes consistent. School culture becomes a bridge that connects academic and spiritual values simultaneously.

The school environment plays a role as an implicit and deeply meaningful religious culture in supporting formal Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies. Through visual design, social

culture, the hidden curriculum, and cultural integration, SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja develops a comprehensive model for learning religious character. This strategy aligns with cross-contextual research (Islamic boarding schools, vocational high schools, and general elementary schools) that demonstrates the effectiveness of school culture design in facilitating religious character education without relying solely on class schedules.

Collaboration with Parents through Islamic Parenting Programs

The development of students' religious character never stops when the dismissal bell rings. At SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja, the school initiated a monthly Islamic Parenting program as a strong bridge between school education and spiritual practice at home. The school regularly invites speakers from the Office of Religious Affairs (KUA) and local religious leaders to provide guidance on Islamic parenting to parents. These activities include workshops on etiquette, habituating worship, and strategies for raising children in accordance with Islamic values. The goal is to create a consistent spiritual environment between family and school, making Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning not merely theoretical but also practical. Research by Mahyuniati (2025) supports the effectiveness of a similar approach. In a case study at Lawe Pinis Public Elementary School, parental involvement through intense communication, role modeling, and support for religious activities at school was shown to significantly strengthen the internalization of children's religious character (Mahyuniati, 2025).

The role of parents is not only in educating, but also in motivating children to learn Islamic Religious Education. Dita Kiana Sari (2024) found that parental support as motivators, facilitators, and collaborators sharply increased students' motivation to learn Islamic Religious Education in MI/SD (Sari, 2024). The Islamic parenting model at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja directly channels this strategy not only through physical parental involvement, but also comprehensive spiritual strengthening. A quantitative study by Arisya'bani (2024) showed that active parental involvement is positively correlated with increased religious knowledge and religious behavior in children (Arisya'bani, 2024). This means that when parents actively participate in their children's spiritual education through discussions, practicing joint worship, or supporting school activities, the child's religious character is better internalized.

Umi Maghfirah Harahap (2024), in her study from a teacher perspective, noted that parental involvement not only strengthens student motivation but also deepens understanding of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material. Synergy between schools and parents strengthens the holistic structure of religious values learning (Harahap, 2024). This collaboration, directed through Islamic Parenting, strengthens the continuity of Islamic religious education across school and home contexts. This is in line with the findings of Mahyuniati (2025), who found that parental activeness is crucial for the consistent internalization of religious values (Mahyuniati, 2025). Furthermore, research by Arisya'bani (2024) and Sari (2022) added that parental support and involvement directly improve student learning outcomes and motivation in Islamic Religious Education (Arisya'bani, 2024; Sari, 2024). According to Harahap (2024), this strong collaboration forms the foundation for meaningful and authentic character learning (Harahap, 2024).

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

In analyzing the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja, it is crucial to understand the context, supports, and challenges that influence their implementation. Based on an analysis of school policy documents and interviews with the principal, several key factors were identified:

Supporting Factors

School policy allocates approximately 20% of the operational budget for religious activities, such as the provision of worship facilities, Islamic Religious Education teacher training, and the provision of small Islamic teaching equipment for classrooms. This commitment demonstrates a serious recognition of the importance of religious education as an integral part of school education. This reinforces the findings of Marantika (2025), which stated that active participation and budgetary support from the school committee positively impact the quality of inclusive education and student character (Marantika, 2025). This budget allows Islamic Religious Education teachers to implement various creative programs such as Islamic parenting programs and strengthening the hidden curriculum. This financial support provides a solid

foundation for the sustainability of religious character-building programs through activities carried out not only in the classroom but also in routine school activities such as morning prayers, congregational prayer practices, and etiquette competitions.

The School Committee at Emo Kurniaatmaja Elementary School is very active, providing strategic input and facilitating communication between the school and parents. Marantika (2025) found that parental involvement through the school committee provides stability and tangible support for student morale-strengthening programs (Marantika, 2025). The school committee consistently voices the need for facilities and encourages the school to expand religious programs, especially given limited learning time. The committee's presence also helps raise funds for improving prayer facilities and holding Islamic parenting workshops. This provides important social capital, strengthening the ecosystem of religious character education within the school.

Inhibiting Factors

One significant structural challenge is the limited time allocated for Islamic Religious Education (PAI): only about two hours per week. This creates pressure to emphasize academic content without sacrificing character development, necessitating more efficient and contextual learning. National research indicates that implementing a hidden curriculum, such as religious greetings, daily prayers, and moral messages, is an adaptive effort by schools when faced with the limitations of formal religious instruction structures. However, the lack of formal time remains a constraint, requiring pedagogical innovation from teachers.

Due to limited time allocation, teachers and schools must be creative in encouraging the internalization of values through informal activities, such as dialogue-based greetings, light recitation before the bell, and hanging Quranic calligraphy along the corridors. This strategy aligns with studies on the hidden curriculum, which have found that school culture and routine practices have a significant impact on shaping students' character. However, this approach requires discipline from teachers and consistent commitment from the school community. If not managed well, the intensity and consistency of implementation can decline, especially when faced with a busy formal agenda or other non-religious activities, posing challenges in maintaining the spiritual life of the school.

The synergy between funding and active school committees creates space for the systematic implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) strategies, despite limited classroom hours. The budgetary foundation allows schools to implement innovations such as parent workshops, facility procurement, and religious school environments. School committees act as a "bridge" for external actors, strengthening implementation. However, formal time constraints remain a limiting factor. The hidden curriculum strategy can partially bridge the gap, but requires structural inclusion, such as integrating Islamic values into general subjects, extracurricular activities, or routine non-academic activities.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategy at SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja successfully shaped the religious character of third-grade students through a contextual approach integrated with everyday values. The main findings indicate that teacher role models were the dominant factor (34%) in the internalization of religious values, followed by the habituation of worship (29%) and curriculum integration (22%). The learning model based on the exemplary story of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, simulations of real-life cases such as bullying, and direct practice such as distributing takjil during Ramadan were proven to increase student participation by 78% compared to conventional lecture methods. The effectiveness of this strategy is not only seen in increased cognitive understanding, but also in changes in affective and psychomotor behavior, such as discipline in congregational Dhuha prayer (92% of students) and tolerance in social interactions. These findings answer the research question of how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) strategies are implemented and their supporting factors. Although the allocation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning time is only two hours per week, the systematic learning design through a hidden curriculum—such as the habituation of religious greetings and the calligraphy of Quranic verses on classroom walls—successfully compensates for this limitation. These results also correct the common assumption that developing religious character requires a long learning period, as long as the strategy is designed holistically and involves the entire school ecosystem.

Based on the research findings, specialized training is needed for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers to optimize their multidimensional roles as spiritual role models, critical facilitators, and holistic

evaluators. Such training should include the development of real-life case-based learning materials and moral portfolio assessment techniques. Policymakers are advised to revise the allocation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instructional time in public elementary schools by considering horizontal integration models—such as incorporating the value of almsgiving (*infaq*) into mathematics lessons—to strengthen the internalization of values without increasing teaching hours. Future research could test the validity of the resulting predictive model of religious character in school contexts with different socio-cultural characteristics, particularly in urban areas with high religious heterogeneity. Furthermore, it is important to explore the role of parents through structured Islamic parenting programs, given that family participation is still limited to the School Committee forum. For theoretical development, further research on the concept of "multidimensional religious character" that includes environmental aspects is recommended, considering SDN Emo Kurniaatmaja's vision as an Adiwiyata school. A mixed-methods approach can be used to measure the long-term impact of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies on student behavior at the community level. Finally, a more comprehensive religious character assessment instrument based on daily behavioral observations is needed, replacing the currently dominant written assessment paradigm. This innovation will ensure that character formation is not only measured quantitatively but also contextually meaningful.

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