

Strengthening Students' Religious Character through the Implementation of School-Based Religious Programs in Junior High Schools

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ABSTRACT

Religious character education plays a pivotal role in shaping adolescents' Islamic values and serves as a preventive measure against deviant behavior and promiscuity. This qualitative field study explores the design and implementation of religious programs in schools and their impact on students' character development. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The analysis followed four stages: data collection, condensation, presentation, and conclusion drawing. Findings reveal that schools systematically incorporate religious education into both daily routines and periodic activities. These include obligatory prayers, *Tadarus* (Qur'an recitation), Islamic holiday commemorations, and community-based religious engagements. Such programs nurture spiritual discipline, promote the pursuit of knowledge, and encourage empathy and social responsibility among students. These religious initiatives not only shape students' moral and spiritual foundations but also act as a buffer against negative influences. They contribute to forming a well-rounded socio-religious identity, enhancing students' resilience and ethical awareness in contemporary social contexts. The study contributes a new perspective on integrating religious education as a strategic approach to character formation and behavioral prevention. It underscores the significance of a holistic religious education model in reinforcing students' moral integrity and societal engagement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religious character education in junior high schools is a strategic effort to shape students who are not only academically intelligent but also possess a strong Islamic personality (Khoiriah et al., 2023). Amidst the rapid flow of globalization and the development of digital technology, the younger generation faces significant challenges in the form of moral degradation, promiscuity, and deviant behavior that can damage their future. Schools, as formal educational institutions, play a vital role in providing a spiritual foundation through various structured religious programs (Jariah et al., 2025).

These programs should not be merely routine but should be an integral part of the habituation and internalization of religious values in students' daily lives (Azis & Siagian, 2025).

Several studies in Malaysia have shown that integrated Islamic education and Quranic teaching methods have a significant impact on student character development. For example, research at international Islamic schools in Malaysia found that the use of Quranic and Prophetic Teaching Methods in teaching non-religious subjects was more effective in instilling character and life skills in students than conventional methods (Eissa, & Khalid, 2017). Furthermore, in Islamic elementary schools in Malaysia, a holistic strategy for developing student discipline that combines spiritual guidance, strengthening social relationships between students, and implementing fair and consistent discipline has been shown to strengthen students' overall character (Abuzar et al., 2024).

In the context of Indonesian education, religious programs such as *Tadarus*, congregational prayer, pesantren Ramadan, and alms giving have been widely implemented in various schools. However, the implementation of these programs is often ceremonial, failing to address the deeper aspects of character formation (Khairunnisa et al., 2024). This raises questions about whether these programs are truly effective in shaping students' religious character or merely a formality. Therefore, an in-depth study of the implementation of religious programs in junior high schools is crucial to assess their impact on the development of students' religious character.

Although many schools have implemented religious programs, previous research has shown limitations in integrating these activities with the curriculum, school culture, and parental participation. Most activities are only conducted during specific occasions, such as Ramadan or Islamic holidays, thus failing to have a long-term impact on the development of students' religious character (Abdurrachman & Makhful, 2021). This situation indicates a gap between the ideal goal of religious character formation and the reality of implementing religious programs in the field.

Furthermore, students' religious awareness is not fully formed through ceremonial activities alone. Systematic efforts are needed to internalize religious values in every aspect of school life, from learning and teacher role models to daily school culture. Several studies have confirmed that weak monitoring and evaluation of religious program implementation results in less than optimal results in developing religious character (Rizqi et al., 2025). This creates a gap for research to explore the implementation of religious programs more comprehensively and in-depth.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to strengthen students' religious character amidst the challenges of the digital era and globalization. Religious character is not only interpreted as improving formal worship but also encompasses the development of social attitudes such as honesty, caring, and responsibility. By integrating religious programs sustainably, schools can become centers for developing a generation with Islamic character that is not only devout but also contributes positively to society (Fitria & Fauzi, 2025).

The rationale for this research is to provide empirical evidence that consistently implemented religious programs can have a significant impact on students' religious character. Activities such as congregational prayer, *Tadarus*, almsgiving, and Pesantren Ramadans have been shown to foster spiritual closeness, self-discipline, and a spirit of sharing with others. Research focused on the implementation of specific religious programs in junior high schools will make a significant contribution to strengthening the theoretical and practical foundations of religious character education (Aini, 2022).

Research by Abdurrachman & Makhful (2021) shows that the implementation of religious character education is carried out through self-development, integration with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, and school culture. However, inhibiting factors such as low student religious awareness and a lack of role models in the home environment remain major obstacles. Another study by Maftukha (2023) revealed that the integration of religious character education is carried out through learning, extracurricular activities, and school culture. However, this study found that communication between schools and parents is not optimal, resulting in suboptimal religious character formation. Furthermore, research by Solahur (2025) found that the implementation of character-based *aqidah* and

akhlak learning is effective in shaping students' faith, worship, and moral values. Previous studies have focused more on religious character education through self-development, integrated learning, and general school culture, but have not detailed concrete religious practices. The novelty of this research lies in filling this gap by specifically examining practical religious programs—such as *tadarus*, *zakat fitrah*, *Duha* prayer, and *Pesantren Ramadan*—and demonstrating their impact on the development of students' spiritual discipline, empathy, and social responsibility.

This study aims to provide an in-depth description of the implementation of religious programs in junior high schools, including *tadarus*, congregational prayer, *pesantren Ramadan*, *zakat al-fitr*, and *infaq, sadaqah*. Furthermore, this study analyzes the implications of these programs on the development of students' religious character, including spiritual closeness to God, discipline in worship, enthusiasm for learning, and concern for others. Furthermore, this study aims to identify supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of religious programs, thereby identifying more effective development strategies for strengthening religious character education at the junior high school level.

This research is urgent because it can make a contribution to the development of a religious character education model relevant to the conditions of students in the modern era. By considering previous research findings and addressing existing gaps, this study is expected to produce applicable findings that can be adopted by other schools. Furthermore, this research can serve as a reference for education policymakers in developing a national strategy for developing religious character. Through the strengthening of structured, systematic, and sustainable religious programs, schools can play a central role in producing a generation that is faithful, virtuous, and globally competitive.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with field research. The qualitative approach was chosen because it sought to understand in-depth phenomena related to the implementation of religious programs and their impact on the development of the religious character of junior high school students. Qualitative research aims to generate descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals and observed behavior. Therefore, this approach was deemed most appropriate for exploring social realities in schools related to students' religious habits.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 3 Palembang that has a structured religious program that includes *tadarus*, congregational prayer, *pesantren Ramadan*, *zakat al-fitr*, and *infaq, sadaqah*. The research subjects were 6 informants consisting of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, homeroom teachers, and students who were directly involved in religious activities. Subjects were selected using purposive sampling, selecting informants based on specific considerations according to the research needs. The selection of six informants using purposive sampling was based on their direct involvement in religious programs, covering the perspectives of Islamic Education teachers as organizers, homeroom teachers as mentors, and students as both participants and beneficiaries. Although the number of participants was limited, the validity of the data remained strong, as qualitative research emphasizes depth of information rather than quantity, further reinforced through triangulation of observations, interviews, and documentation.

Data collection utilized three main techniques. First, participant observation, in which the researcher was directly present during religious activities such as congregational prayer, *tadarus*, and *Pesantren Ramadan* activities to observe student behavior and teacher interactions. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, Islamic Religious Education teachers, homeroom teachers, and students to obtain information about program implementation, supporting factors, obstacles, and the impact on religious character formation. Third, documentation was collected, in the form of school activity records, religious program schedules, activity photos, and relevant school administrative data. Data triangulation was used to ensure the validity of the information by comparing the results of the three techniques.

Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes four main stages: (1) data collection through observation, interviews, and documentation; (2) data condensation,

which involved selecting, simplifying, and classifying data according to the research focus; (3) data display (presentation of data) in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, or matrices to facilitate understanding; and (4) conclusion drawing/verification (drawing conclusions) by linking data findings to the theory and research objectives.

To ensure data validity, this study used source triangulation, technical triangulation, and time triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from the principal, teachers, and students. Technical triangulation was conducted by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation. Meanwhile, time triangulation was conducted by repeating data collection at different times to ensure consistency of information.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Implementation of Religious Programs in Junior High Schools

Based on observations conducted over two weeks, it was apparent that *Tadarus* activities were held every morning before the first period began. Students sat in groups in the classroom, guided by the homeroom teacher or Islamic Religious Education teacher. Observations showed that most students enthusiastically participated in this activity, although some arrived late and were unable to participate fully. The teacher played an active role in providing motivation, emphasizing that recitation was not just reading, but also an exercise in discipline and respect for learning time. An interview with the Principal corroborated this finding. He stated:

"We use the morning recitation activity as a way to open the day. Students who are accustomed to reciting the Quran in the morning are better prepared mentally for lessons. Furthermore, we want to instill the values of discipline and a love for the Quran from an early age."

Congregational Duha and Zuhr prayers were also observed to be quite regular. Observations showed that students performed congregational prayers in the school mosque, led by a teacher or a student appointed as imam. However, not all students appeared devout; some joked with their friends while waiting for prayers to begin. However, the overall religious atmosphere is quite palpable, especially when teachers set an example by participating in congregational prayers. An eighth-grade student with the initials KD said in an interview:

"At first, I was reluctant to join in congregational prayers at school, but over time I got used to it. Especially when all my friends join in, I feel like I'm missing out if I don't."

Weekly alms and charity activities are held every Friday. Based on observations, donation boxes are circulated throughout each class, and students contribute according to their ability. The collected funds are used to help underprivileged students or are distributed to a local orphanage. An interview with the homeroom teacher, Mrs. SAV, revealed that these activities have a positive impact on students' sense of caring.

"We see the children beginning to realize the importance of sharing. Some students even consistently set aside some of their pocket money every week, even if it's not much. That shows a change in character."

The Pesantren Ramadan and zakat fitrah (Islamic charity) program are an annual program that is enthusiastically received. Documentation of the activities shows students participating in tafsir (interpretation) studies, practicing memorizing prayers, and practicing zakat procedures. In an interview, the principal emphasized that this activity was not only spiritual strengthening but also a way to cultivate social awareness.

"This Pesantren Ramadan is the most comprehensive opportunity. The children learn religious knowledge, practice worship, and also practice sharing through zakat al-fitr (alms giving). Their religious character seems to have developed significantly after participating in this activity."

Observations and interviews indicate that religious programs such as *Tadarus*, congregational Duha and Zuhr prayers, donations and alms, Pesantren Ramadans, and zakat al-fitr (Islamic charity) have been implemented effectively in schools. These activities are not merely routine but serve as a means of fostering habits that internalize religious values in students.

This finding aligns with the concept of habit formation in Islamic education, where habituation (*ta'dib*) is an effective means of instilling religious values (Hanifiyah, 2022; Nurizah & Amrullah, 2024). According to Lickona (1991), habituation in character education allows students to internalize values through direct experience. According to Yunus et al. (2022), the habit of reciting the Koran at school can shape students' religious character, particularly in terms of discipline, honesty, and love for the Quran. This study emphasizes that daily practice, even if simple, has a significant impact because consistency is more influential than occasional activities. Furthermore, Nabila et al. (2023) found that the "reciting the Koran before studying" program can build students' spiritual readiness, making them calmer and more focused in following the lesson. Thus, students' increasing enthusiasm for reciting the Koran is empirical evidence of the effectiveness of this religious habituation strategy.

Weekly alms and charity activities have also been shown to influence students' social awareness. Khofi (2025) emphasized that the habit of regular alms giving fosters empathy, concern, and a sense of social responsibility in students, ultimately strengthening solidarity within the school environment. Furthermore, according to Rismawan (2023), who emphasized that alms and charity are not merely acts of charity, but also serve as a medium for character education, particularly in fostering sincerity and simplicity. The Pesantren Ramadan program and zakat fitrah have proven to be the most comprehensive medium for developing religious character. According to Putri (2023), Pesantren Ramadans are able to improve students' religious attitudes, both in terms of religious knowledge, worship skills, and social awareness. Activities such as tafsir studies, zakat practices, and prayer exercises serve as a means of habituation and internalization of values. Humna (2024) and Kamila (2024) found that regular *Tadarus* at school strengthens students' discipline and enthusiasm for learning. Meanwhile, Nst (2025) and Achadah (2021) emphasized that the practice of congregational prayer at school plays a significant role in building social solidarity and student spirituality. Thus, religious programs in junior high schools are proven to be a systematic strategy to shape students' religious behavior comprehensively.

Although practical religious programs such as *tadarus*, zakat fitrah and Pesantren Ramadan have shown positive impacts, several limitations remain. First, limited learning time often hinders the in-depth implementation of religious practices at home—especially when religious practices must be integrated into already busy schedules. Second, external influences such as social media and digital content that do not always align with religious values can weaken the effectiveness of habituation—this content sometimes encourages behavior that contradicts school and religious norms. Third, the lack of consistent role models in the home or community—even when schools are strong—can also hinder the full internalization of values.

Socio-culturally, challenges arise from diverse economic backgrounds, local cultures, and beliefs, which can influence how students accept and practice religious values. For example, research on culture-based character education shows that local values are not always optimally integrated in schools, resulting in students experiencing dissonance between school values and home cultural values (Ihwani et al., 2020). Furthermore, long-term challenges include program sustainability when school leadership changes, as well as adapting to changing times (such as technological advancements, fast-paced lifestyles, and urban environments) without sacrificing the essence of the values intended to be instilled. While technology opens up opportunities, it can also erode some aspects of religiosity if not properly managed (Ramadhani, 2022).

3.2. Formation of Students' Religious Character

Based on observations and interviews, the religious program had a significant impact on the development of students' religious character. Students demonstrated changes in several aspects. First,

the spiritual dimension, evident in the increased habit of reciting prayers before studying and attending congregational prayers more devoutly. Second, the moral dimension, reflected in increased discipline, politeness, and adherence to school rules. Third, the social dimension, evident in their concern through participation in charity and social assistance.

A seventh-grade student with the initials TI revealed in an interview:

"I often forgot to pray, but now I'm used to it because I'm reminded every day at school. I also pray more often at home with my parents."

These findings support Lickona's (1991) theory of the three components of character education: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. The school's religious program has provided knowledge of religious values, fostered religious feelings, and encouraged students to act in accordance with those values. Religious programs have an impact on the development of students' religious character, encompassing spiritual dimensions (closeness to God through worship), moral dimensions (discipline, honesty, courtesy), and social dimensions (caring for others through almsgiving, charity, and zakat). Observations show that students are more consistent in their religious practices, while interviews reveal positive behavioral changes at home.

Religious activities at school have been shown to have a significant impact on the development of students' religious character. This is evident in increased religious discipline, such as congregational prayer, reciting prayers before studying, and the habit of reciting dhikr and reciting the Quran. This finding aligns with Lickona's (1991) concept of moral knowing, which states that students not only know religious values but also understand them deeply. Fajri & Kamilah (2025) emphasized that religious practices such as daily prayer, congregational prayer, and Quranic recitation, when consistently practiced, can foster superior morality and enhance students' honesty and responsibility in their daily lives.

In addition to developing knowledge of values, religious activities also foster moral feelings, fostering a religious attitude in students' lives. Observations indicate that students are more devout in their worship, while interviews revealed positive behavioral changes at home, such as praying with their parents. Bachtiar & Salim (2025) stated that regular religious activities at school, such as congregational prayer and Quran memorization, can foster discipline as a form of moral habit that is deeply ingrained in students. This reinforces the belief that the religiousness formed at school can be carried over into the family environment.

In the moral action dimension, students demonstrate concrete behaviors such as participation in almsgiving, giving charity, and other social activities. This change aligns with the idea that religious character does not stop at understanding and feelings but must be manifested in action. Fathurrahman et al. (2024) emphasized that extracurricular programs based on religious values can foster students' independence, resilience, and social sensitivity. Thus, religious programs serve as a means of integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in the formation of religious character.

The integration of religious values into school culture also strengthens student motivation and discipline. Ristiano et al. (2023) showed that Islamic-based organizational culture, such as morning prayer and congregational prayer, increases students' readiness to learn, responsibility, and motivation to behave better. This aligns with observational findings that students become more organized and better prepared for lessons after religious activities are consistently implemented. In this way, schools are able to create a conducive learning environment while simultaneously shaping religious character. Furthermore, social interactions that occur in schools play a crucial role in strengthening the internalization of religious values. Makalao et al. (2025) emphasize that social interactions between students and with teachers based on religious values can shape sustainable moral behavior. This is in line with the recognition of students who have become accustomed to inviting their parents to congregational prayers at home, indicating that the religious values practiced at school resonate in family life. Thus, religious programs function not only as a habituation but also as a medium for forming a comprehensive religious character.

This aligns with Lickona's (1991) theory of character education, which encompasses moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. These three aspects are clearly reflected in students' practices after participating in religious programs. These findings also align with research by Nurizah (2024) and Sholikah (2025), which demonstrated that character-based religious practices can enhance students' moral awareness. Darmayanti (2025) and Suroto (2022) added that religious activities during Ramadan have a significant impact on the development of comprehensive religious character. Thus, the results of this study confirm that religious programs can be a strategic tool for strengthening students' spirituality, morality, and social awareness.

Although religious programs in schools have demonstrated positive effects, international studies reveal that their effectiveness is often limited by differing cultural contexts and social conditions. Adolescents in pluralistic environments or those where families are not actively religious are more likely to experience dissonance between the values taught in school and practices at home or in peer groups (García-Segura et al., 2022; Ulfat, 2023). Furthermore, the infrastructure for religious education and the professionalism of educators also pose challenges at the university or public school level, particularly as global issues such as the flow of information through social media and popular culture begin to shift attention from religious values to secular or consumerist ones (Khoerudin et al., 2024; Ulfat, 2023).

Regarding long-term challenges, several studies emphasize that the sustainability of religious programs depends heavily on family support, consistency in implementation, and adaptation to social and technological changes. If religious character education is not aligned with the realities of cultural and media change, there is a risk that the values instilled will lose relevance or become mere rituals without profound moral meaning (García-Segura et al., 2022). Therefore, long-term strategies need to include intensive parental involvement, the development of flexible and innovative teaching methods, and ongoing monitoring to ensure that the religious values instilled truly become part of students' identities in their daily lives.

3.3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Based on observations and interviews, the religious program had a significant impact on the development of students' religious character. Students demonstrated changes in several aspects. First, the spiritual dimension, evident in the increased habit of reciting prayers before studying and attending congregational prayers more devoutly. Second, the moral dimension, reflected in increased discipline, politeness, and adherence to school rules. Third, the social dimension, evident in their concern through participation in charity and social assistance.

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4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that the implementation of religious programs in junior high schools—such as daily *Tadarus*, congregational prayers, alms and donation activities, Pesantren Ramadan, zakat al-fitr, and PHBI—plays a vital role in shaping students' religious character. These initiatives foster spiritual growth through worship, strengthen moral values such as discipline, honesty, and politeness, and enhance social awareness through empathy and concern for others. The effectiveness of these programs is strongly supported by teacher commitment, principal leadership, adequate facilities, and parental involvement, while challenges remain in the form of low student motivation and the negative influence of social media.

Practically, this finding underlines the importance for educators and policymakers to consistently integrate religious programs into school life, ensure institutional and parental support, and adapt innovative learning approaches to sustain student engagement. However, the scope of this study is limited, as it focuses on a single school context and is based on relatively short-term observations and interviews. Therefore, future research could expand by conducting comparative studies across different schools and regions, exploring the long-term impacts of religious programs through longitudinal approaches, and examining how such programs can be effectively integrated with digital learning platforms to address contemporary challenges.

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