

## Strengthening Students' Religious Character Through Contextual Teaching and Learning in Islamic Elementary Schools

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### ABSTRACT

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This religious character building should ideally begin at an early age, because elementary school is a crucial environment where the foundations of a child's character begin to form. Religious education in elementary school plays a strategic role in strengthening religious character. The contextual learning approach has emerged as a solution, seeking to connect the subject matter with the real lives of students. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design. Three main techniques are used: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation study. Data analysis is conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which includes data condensation, data presentation, and conclusions. Meanwhile, data validity techniques include extended observation and triangulation. The results of the study show that the religious education program at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember is planned collaboratively with appropriate documents and targets. The program is implemented from morning to noon based on the principles of exemplary behavior and habit formation. Meanwhile, the evaluation process is carried out through tasmi' exams from external parties and monitoring by parents using a book of religious practices. The strengthening of the religious character of students includes a character that not only understands religion in terms of rituals but also its knowledge so that they become closer to Allah. Religious character is strengthened with a variety of contextual strategies through tadarus keliling learning and methods of reprimand and teacher role modeling. Both strategies are part of the Context Teaching and Learning approach, which can have a direct impact on increasing awareness of religion and culture, reminding each other.

**Keywords:** Contextual Teaching and Learning, Islamic Elementary School, Religious Character.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education plays a central role in developing quality human resources, not only in terms of cognitive skills, but also affective and psychomotor skills. In the Indonesian context, education aims to shape a generation that is faithful, devoted to God Almighty, noble in character, healthy, knowledgeable, skilled, creative, independent, and democratic and responsible citizens. This noble goal emphasizes that character building is the essence of the educational process, which cannot be ignored in any situation or condition (Djazilan & Akhwani, 2022).

Character building, especially religious character, is becoming increasingly urgent amid the complex challenges of globalization, rapid technological developments, and shifting social values that have the potential to erode the morality of the younger generation. Religious character is one of the main pillars in the formation of a well-rounded personality in students. This is the main objective of education, which not only requires students to be intellectually intelligent, but also spiritually mature (Fauzieyah & Suyatno, 2024).

The instillation of moral and ethical values derived from religious teachings, particularly Islam, is fundamental to creating individuals with integrity and responsibility. In addition, the views of scholars such as Hazim Muzadi, Ahmad Siddiq, and Achmad Dahlan on the concept of rahmatan lil'alamin can also strengthen students' character at school (Nurdin, Hendra, Tobroni, & Khozin, 2023). Ideally, religious character building should begin at an early age, as elementary school is a crucial environment where a child's character foundation begins to form and becomes a strong foundation for their social life (Rizki, Ritonga, & Addin, 2025). Religious based elementary schools, especially Islamic ones, have become a growing phenomenon in society due to the strong belief that religious education can shape students' characters in accordance with Islamic beliefs (Ardiansyah, 2019).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in elementary schools plays a strategic role in strengthening the religious character of students. More than just transferring religious knowledge, PAI aims to internalize Islamic values into students' daily lives. An effective PAI curriculum can shape personalities that are honest, disciplined, and have a sense of responsibility and empathy towards others (Acetylena, Agustin, Amrillah, & Setiawan, 2024).

Various PAI implementation strategies that have been studied show the significant contribution of PAI to character building in students, including through the integration of Islamic values in learning, teacher role modeling, the habit of worship and noble character, and religious extracurricular activities. Religious habits such as Dhuha prayer, Quran recitation, praying together before and after learning, and practicing Islamic behavior at school play an important role in shaping students' religious character. In fact, religious extracurricular programs that include religious practices, living hadith, tahsin, and tahfizh have been proven to shape the religious character, discipline, and responsibility of students (Nahdia, Zubaidillah, & Azmi, 2023).

Aisyah and Fitriyah demonstrated that strengthening religious character can be achieved through a combination of expository methods and habit-forming strategies, such as reading Surah Yasin and Asmaul Husna. This study emphasizes that structured habit formation helps build a school environment that supports the internalization of religious character through routine activities that are closely related to the daily religious practices of students (Aisyah & Fitriyah, 2024).

Other studies also confirm that strengthening religious character education through school cultural habits has an effect on improving religious attitudes, faith, responsibility, and morals.

The phenomenological study also shows supporting factors in the form of school environment conditions, the role of teachers, and cooperation between parents and schools, while obstacles can arise from the rejection of some students and parents (Sofannah, Amrullah, & Wardana, 2023).

The next study describes the formation of religious character at the elementary level through the habit of religious activities, such as praying before and after learning, praying Duha and Dhuhr in congregation, reading Juz 'Amma, Asmaul Husna, Istighasah, infaq, and 5S. The study shows that the characters developed include piety, sincerity, honesty, politeness, mutual assistance, cleanliness, competitiveness, and gratitude (Nurbaiti, Alwy, & Taulabi, 2020).

However, the implementation of religious character education through PAI is not without challenges. Some of the obstacles that are often encountered include limited time and resources, as well as a lack of cooperation between parents and the community (Khasanah & Rosila, 2025). In the context of the digital age, challenges are increasing, such as limited access to technology, difficulties in internalizing Islamic values through digital media, and the potential for a reduction in social interaction, which is essential for character development. Distractions from technology and a lack of literacy and technological skills among teachers are also significant obstacles (Yasmin, Taufiq, & Gusmaneli, 2024).

In response to these challenges, contextual learning has emerged as a promising solution. Contextual teaching and learning seeks to connect lesson material with the real lives of students, making the material more meaningful and easier to apply (Taufik, 2019). This approach helps students better understand Islamic Religious Education and feel its connection to their daily lives. Research shows that contextual learning models significantly improve students' theoretical understanding and practical application, for example in prayer. This approach not only increases students' motivation to worship, but also positively strengthens their character (Parhan, Syahidin, Somad, Abdulah, & Nugraha, 2024).

In addition, although much literature highlights the importance of religious character education and the implementation of religious learning programs, there is still a lack of in-depth case studies at the elementary school level, especially those focusing on specific local contexts. For example, bibliometric analysis of Islamic schools or madrassas shows that comparative studies in various contexts and the inclusion of underrepresented regions are still needed (Hussin, Muhammad, Razak, & Awang, 2024).

Many studies tend to be general descriptive in nature or focus on Islamic boarding schools, but case studies on Islamic elementary schools with unique local identities and challenges still need to be increased. Several studies have been conducted, such as the Sekolah Mengaji program in Bandung (Nurhayati, Ulfah, & Suhendi, 2025) or the integration of Sufi values at the MTs Islamic Boarding School in Jember (Anam, 2021).

SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember, as an Islamic elementary school, has a big responsibility to produce a generation that is not only academically excellent but also has strong religious character. Located in Jember, this school interacts directly with a unique local social and cultural context, which can be a source of inspiration as well as a challenge in character education. Therefore, research on the implementation of religious education programs and the strengthening of religious character in a contextual manner at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember is highly relevant.

The case of SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember is unique because it is rooted in a specific local context, namely a unique local social and cultural context. This shows that religious education and character building programs are not carried out in a vacuum, but are influenced by and may

also adapt to local characteristics. This uniqueness can be a source of inspiration or a challenge that is different from other regions.

This study aims to conduct an in-depth qualitative case study at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember. It focuses on the context of planning identification, best practices, unique challenges, and evaluation in religious education programs. In addition, this study specifically examines how religious character is interpreted and instilled through contextual learning and teaching and what impact it has on students and their parents or guardians. Based on preliminary research data, this article is expected to make a significant new contribution, particularly in the context of strengthening religious character. These findings can serve as a reference for other schools that wish to develop similar programs.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach, which investigates a phenomenon described by the research subjects, using a case study research design. This study reveals and describes in depth an interesting phenomenon or case related to strengthening the religious character of students at school (Creswell, 2016). Case studies were chosen because the research aimed to investigate intensively and in detail a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context, namely the strengthening of religious character at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Yin, 2006).

The research subjects were selected purposively based on specific criteria relevant to the focus of the study. They are individuals who have direct information and experience related to the implementation of religious education programs and religious character building at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember. The research subjects include: Siti Khairun Nisak (SKN) as Principal, Providing information on policies and religious education programs at the school. M. Bahrudin Rosyadi (BR) as Deputy Principal for Religious Affairs, the main source of data on the implementation of religious education programs. Rozikin (RZ) as Islamic Education Teacher, the main source of data on the implementation of religious education programs. Uwais Rafiq Putra (URP) as a Student, providing information about their experiences and perceptions of the religious education program at the school.

The three main techniques used in data mining are in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies. This research was conducted over a period of three months, from October to December 2025. In terms of observation techniques, the researcher acted as a participating observer, as he directly observed religious learning activities at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember. Data analysis is carried out using an interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which consists of three stages: data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Researchers apply data validity techniques including extended observation, meaning that researchers spend a considerable amount of time at the research site to build trust and gain in-depth understanding. Second, triangulation, meaning that researchers compare data from various sources (research subjects), methods (interviews, observation, documentation), and theories to verify the consistency of findings (Creswell, 2016).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation of Religious Education for Students

Based on the results of the research data analysis, the researcher found that the planning of the religious education program at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember was carried out in several stages, namely planning by involving all school stakeholders and also receiving input from

external parties. The next stage in planning was to compile the curriculum document. As seen in the documents obtained by the researcher in the structure of the local religious curriculum, the school specifically lists the Al-Bidayah book as the main reference for Arabic grammar or science (Nahwu Sharaf) subjects. The inclusion of this book in the curriculum document has a strategic value that goes beyond the mere selection of textbooks; it affirms the strong scientific affiliation (sanad) between the school and the Al-Bidayah Islamic Boarding School. This document is physical evidence that the religious material taught at the school is not compiled arbitrarily but refers to the authoritative scientific tradition of Islamic boarding schools.

The final stage of the religious education program planning process is to set targets for each learning program. These targets must be realistic and based on the abilities of each student. These stages are relevant to the principles of learning planning outlined by Sagala, which include: determining what is to be implemented; limiting the objectives and targets of each planned program; developing alternative strategies to be implemented; analyzing urgent information; and communicating each plan (Rachman, 2018).

Based on an analysis using Sagala's learning planning principles, SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember demonstrated excellent planning practices, particularly in terms of stakeholder participation, holistic target setting, and plan communication. The aspect of developing alternative learning strategies may require further exploration of the data to see the extent of the variety of strategies considered, but the existence of curriculum documents is a positive indicator of planned strategies.

In the implementation stage of religious education programs, teacher role modeling (uswah hasanah) is a crucial factor in shaping moral character and improving student learning outcomes, both cognitively, affectively, and psychomotorically (Oktavia & Fadriati, 2023). In the context of SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember, the success of the tadarus, tahlidz, dhuha prayer, and practical fiqh programs greatly depends on the extent to which Islamic Education teachers and all school staff can be real examples in applying these Islamic values. Teachers who are disciplined in performing the dhuha prayer with students, who are fluent in reading the Qur'an and its memorization, and who are consistent in applying the principles of fiqh in their daily lives, will have a significant impact. Students will be more motivated and find it easier to internalize these values if they see them practiced directly by their educators.

The habituation and cultivation of values are effective strategies for character building (Yesshe, 2024). The program at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember explicitly applies this concept by scheduling religious activities from morning to noon. The routine implementation of tadarus and tahlidz creates a habit for students to interact with the Qur'an, fostering love and discipline in memorizing and understanding its contents. This builds a culture of Qur'anic literacy in schools. The habit of praying dhuha in congregation instills discipline, spiritual awareness, and togetherness. Practical fiqh activities teach students to apply religious teachings in their daily lives, shape behavior in accordance with Islamic law, and encourage moral action.

Although activities such as Quran recitation, memorization, dhuha prayer, and practical fiqh at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember are integrated into the daily schedule, their structured nature and focus on developing religious aspects can be viewed as an extended form of extracurricular program. Character education, which integrates moral and ethical values such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy into the curriculum and school activities, is very important in shaping ethical and responsible individuals. Activities such as tadarus, tahlidz, dhuha prayers, and practical fiqh, although they may not be extracurricular, serve as in-depth religious enrichment programs (Nabillah, Masnawati, & Majid, 2024).

The data obtained by researchers shows that the fiqh practice manual is the main instructional document that is fully oriented towards amaliyah or direct application. This document is designed to ensure that students' understanding does not stop at the cognitive level (knowing the pillars and requirements), but is manifested in the motor skills of correct and valid worship. The use of these guidelines is based on a curriculum policy that emphasizes real-life simulations in the classroom, so that the validity of students' worship can be monitored and corrected directly by teachers. These guidelines serve as a technical standard of reference, ensuring that every student has uniform movements and recitations in prayer that are in accordance with the teachings of the Sharia.

The evaluation process of the religious education program at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember shows a comprehensive and participatory approach, which effectively integrates the roles of families and communities (Arifin, 2017). The variety of evaluation methods, ranging from external examinations to home-based monitoring, greatly supports the religious character education of students. The involvement of external examiners for the tasmi' examination is a tangible form of cooperation with the community. This practice brings several important benefits, such as objectivity and credibility.

Cooperation with families, School and Parent Teacher Association (PSDW) forums, and home-based monitoring are the most significant types of program evaluation in cooperation with families. This can be seen in the PSDW forum and the strict monitoring system for habit-forming activities. The family is the first and foremost educational environment for students (Arifin, 2017). This monitoring system directly involves parents in supervising and supporting students' worship practices at home, the habit of praying and other religious practices at home, with the support of parents, contributing to the formation of a disciplined and obedient character. The existence of a Worship Practice Book (Buku Amalan Ibadah) that requires parents' signatures shows a model of collaboration between parents and schools in building Islamic character in children.

Based on the data obtained by the researchers, the school implements a strict and structured monitoring mechanism through four main connecting documents in order to ensure the effectiveness of the religious education program in strengthening the character of students. These documents consist of a Quran recitation achievement book and a Quran memorization achievement book, which serve to monitor religious academic progress, a school monitoring book to record student behavior dynamics during learning activities, and a worship practice book that focuses on activities outside of school. The existence of these four books as official documents shows that the school has a comprehensive and holistic evaluation system, where student assessment is not only based on one aspect, but also includes the ability to read the Qur'an, memorization skills, discipline at school, and consistency in worship at home.

### **Strengthening Students' Religious Character Through Contextual Teaching and Learning**

Based on the findings of the study, the meaning of character according to the research subjects is that students are mentally and spiritually prepared, understanding Islam not only as a ritual but also as a science. This interpretation is closely related to moral knowing in Lickona's concept of character (Lickona, 1991). This shows that students are expected to have a strong cognitive understanding of Islamic teachings. Spiritual readiness can also be linked to the development of moral feelings that support noble values. This interpretation is also very much in line with Al-Ghazali's view. Spiritual readiness is at the core of Al-Ghazali's character education, which is oriented towards closeness to Allah (Mainuddin, Tobroni, & Nurhakim, 2023). A comprehensive understanding of Islam is in line with the importance of knowledge

and a deep understanding of religious teachings as a foundation for controlling desires and developing a pious soul.

The meaning of other characters focuses on how students interact with the opposite sex (mahram/ghairu mahram) and daily manners. This is a concrete example of moral action in Lickona's concept of character (Lickona, 1991). Appropriate interactions and manners are manifestations of internalized moral values. This is very relevant to the formation of noble character through habit and practice. Good social interaction and manners are part of the integrity emphasized by Al-Ghazali, as well as control of lust (al-syahwaniyyah) in the context of intergender relationships. Another meaning of religious character that SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember wants to instill in its students is Qur'anic character. This meaning is the main objective of character education in Al-Ghazali's view (Mainuddin et al., 2023). Qur'anic character refers to character that reflects the values, ethics, and teachings contained in the Qur'an and Sunnah.

The strengthening of students' religious character is carried out through contextual learning. Theoretically, Contextual Teaching Learning is a learning system that has various characteristics, principles, and components that distinguish it from other types of learning. Its principles include learning in the context of life experiences, learning in the context of exploration, learning in the context of knowledge application, learning in the context of communication and sharing, and learning in the context of knowledge transfer (Mashudi & Azzahro, 2020).

The monthly tadarus keliling program, with parents committed to supervising the results of religious learning at home, is very much in line with the principles of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). In the context of CTL, there are three main principles as described by Johnson, namely the principle of interdependence, the principle of differentiation, and the principle of self-regulation. The mobile Quran recitation program is relevant to the first principle, namely interdependence, so that students, schools, and parents participate in the activity. This process encourages students to find meaning and connect learning materials with their real world (Mashudi & Azzahro, 2020). This program connects religious learning materials with the realities of students' lives at home and in society. Contextual learning helps students connect learning materials with real life (Nababan & Sipayung, 2023).

The strategy of reprimanding and modeling by teachers is an important key in strengthening the religious character of students and is very relevant to the steps in the CTL approach (Nababan & Sipayung, 2023). From another perspective, it is referred to as CTL characteristics such as modeling, experience, questioning, and others (Mazrur, 2021). In the direct experience stage, students can learn directly when teachers provide reprimands and role models in the implementation of religious learning. Teachers are not only conveyors of material, but also role models who influence the attitudes, behaviors, and values of students. Reprimands from teachers are an effective way to provide guidance and warnings, encouraging students to reflect on their actions. Through reprimands and observation of student responses, teachers can assess the extent to which students' religious character has developed.

The two strategies above describe how CTL is implemented in religious education at SDS Islam Ulul Albab. The first strategy is not only centered in school, but also involves the commitment of parents to monitor the results of religious education at home. Thus, religious education is not only a formal activity at school, but is also integrated into the family and social environment of students. The second strategy has an impact on teachers, who not only act as conveyors of religious material but also actively influence the attitudes, behaviors, and values of students through the example they set. The reprimands given by teachers serve as effective guidance and warnings, encouraging students to reflect on their actions.

There are two visible impacts during and after the implementation of the religious education program at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember. The first impact is a change in the attitude of parents who express great concern for religion, which is an increase in concern for religion among parents and students. Based on Lickhona's character concept, the first impact on the character formation of students is in accordance with the three dimensions of character, namely moral knowing, which means that a caring attitude and focus on religion indicate an increase in moral awareness and knowledge of moral values derived from religious teachings. Next is moral feeling, which is an increase in conscience or the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Then there is moral action, which means that concern for religion will ultimately encourage moral actions that are consistent with those beliefs. This could mean greater obedience to religious practices (Lickona, 1991).

The second impact is the development of a culture of mutual reminders or social control. This impact is also very much in line with Lickona's concept of good character (Lickona, 1991), particularly in the context of character building supported by the social environment. Lickona emphasizes that effective character education involves support from teachers, families, and the community. A culture of mutual reminders is a tangible form of collective moral action in which community members take an active role in maintaining and strengthening moral standards.

## CONCLUSION

Based on analysis and discussion, two research findings can be identified, namely that the religious education program at SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember is planned collaboratively with appropriate documents and targets. The program is implemented from morning to afternoon based on the principles of exemplary behavior and habituation. Meanwhile, the evaluation process is carried out through tasmi' exams by external parties and monitoring by parents using worship practice books.

The second research finding is the strengthening of the religious character of students, which includes not only understanding religion in terms of rituals but also its knowledge, so that they become closer to Allah. This religious character is strengthened by various contextual strategies through tadarus keliling learning and methods of reprimand and teacher role modeling. The impact is an increase in concern for religion and a culture of mutual reminders.

The above research findings imply the strengthening of holistic religious character, meaning that religious education curricula and school activities must be designed to emphasize not only religious rituals, but also a deep scientific understanding of religion, so that students feel closer to God. This means balancing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in religious education. Second, it implies the development of contextual learning strategies, such as "tadarus keliling" and educational reprimand methods, which can strengthen students' religious character. This encourages teachers to be more creative in delivering religious education material.

The limitation of this study is that it cannot be directly generalized to all Islamic schools or different contexts without adjustment, because this study focuses on only one specific institution, namely SDS Islam Ulul Albab Jember. Based on the limitations of this study, the suggestion for further research is to develop a learning program model for strengthening religious character that can be replicated and adapted by other Islamic schools.

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