
**THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ISLAMIC CHARACTER
EDUCATION IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (PAI) AT STATE
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SUKASARI: ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY
ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, students, and other school stakeholders interpret and experience this lack of synchronization in their daily practices. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research focuses on participants' subjective experiences and the social processes that shape their understanding of Islamic character education at Sukasari Public Elementary School. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, involving eight participants consisting of PAI teachers, students, and the school principal. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning emerging from classroom interactions, reflections, and social dynamics. The findings reveal three main themes: inconsistency between school culture and the Islamic values being taught, teachers' moral identity struggles in balancing professional and spiritual demands, and students' affective dissonance when the values learned do not align with their social experiences. This study contributes theoretically by broadening the understanding of Islamic character education as a relational and emotional process, while also offering practical implications, including the importance of dialogical learning, strengthening school culture, and providing emotional support for both teachers and students. Furthermore, the study opens avenues for future research on moral identity and social dynamics in religious education in Indonesia.

Keywords: Disparity, Theory, Practice, Islamic Education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social and cultural dynamics within elementary school settings have exhibited increasing complexity in the process of shaping students' character. At Sukasari State Elementary School, Islamic Education (PAI) teachers have observed notable changes in students' behavior, including a decline in courteous conduct, reduced social awareness, and weakened discipline in performing routine religious practices. These phenomena are evident in daily interactions, such as heightened distraction due to gadget use, peer communication patterns influenced by digital language styles, and low persistence in participating in religious habituation activities, including morning Qur'anic recitation and *Dhuha* prayer. From the teachers' perspective, these conditions do not merely reflect individual behavioral changes but also indicate broader shifts in learning culture and value systems, shaped by family environments, the pervasive influence of digital media, and the weakening of social control within the wider community.

Field observations conducted at the beginning of the 2025/2026 academic year indicate that some students perceive character-building habituation activities more as administrative routines than as meaningful value-based practices. Exploratory interviews with several teachers reveal that the internalization of Islamic values often does not continue consistently within the family environment, resulting in value misalignment between school and home. Parents acknowledge that work-related busyness and the dominance of digital media use at home limit their capacity to provide continuous role modeling. This condition highlights a clear gap between the theoretical framework of Islamic character education which emphasizes role modeling, habituation, and the integrated roles of schools and families and the practical realities encountered by teachers in classroom instruction.

The urgency of strengthening Islamic character education has become increasingly evident in the global context. Numerous international studies indicate that the post-digital era has introduced new challenges to children's character development, particularly in relation to self-regulation, empathy, and moral discipline (Irmayanti & Chusniyah, 2024; Muslimah et al., 2025; Nurhabibah et al., 2025). At the national level, the character strengthening policy embedded in the *Merdeka Curriculum* requires schools to deliver learning experiences that are holistic, contextual, and centered on students' lived learning experiences. However, the implementation of this policy at the elementary school level has not been evenly realized, particularly in ensuring that Islamic Religious Education goes beyond the mere transmission of cognitive knowledge and functions as a meaningful lived experience for students. At Sukasari State Elementary School, this challenge is reflected in the gap between curricular expectations and classroom practices, which remain predominantly oriented toward cognitive achievement rather than the internalization of values.

A review of the literature over the past five years indicates notable developments in research on Islamic character education. Several studies highlight the strategic role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in fostering a religious classroom climate and in implementing religious habituation practices effectively (Aji et al., 2025; Febriyanti & Supriyadi, 2023; Khairani & Rosyidi, 2022). "Other studies emphasize the importance of collaboration between schools and families in strengthening the effectiveness of character education, particularly in ensuring the consistency of value internalization between the school environment and students' home lives (Hidayat & Nurhayati, 2021) as well as the utilization of technology integrated with Islamic values (Basyari & Marwiji, 2025). Nevertheless, most

of these studies continue to focus primarily on conceptual models, instructional strategies, or program evaluations. There remains a limited body of research that explores in depth the subjective experiences of teachers and students, the everyday social dynamics within schools, and the meaning-making processes that give rise to the gap between theory and practice in Islamic character education at the elementary school level.

The gap identified in the existing literature underscores the importance of conducting qualitative research in the context of Sukasari State Elementary School. By examining teachers' experiences, students' perceptions, and the socio-cultural dynamics that develop within the school environment, this study is expected to reveal latent processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative approaches or purely conceptual analyses. Based on this context, the present study aims to explore and analyze the gap between theory and practice in Islamic character education within the teaching of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at Sukasari State Elementary School. The focus of the study includes the experiences of teachers and students, the dynamics of religious habituation practices, role-modeling practices, and the influence of the school and family environments on the process of character internalization. Theoretically, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of Islamic character education through the lens of lived experience and social processes. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a reference for schools, PAI teachers, and policymakers in formulating more contextual, relevant, and sustainable strategies for the implementation of character education.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Islamic Character Education

Islamic character education refers to a systematic process of cultivating students' values, attitudes, and behaviors grounded in Islamic teachings, encompassing *aqidah* (faith), *akhlaq* (morality), and *ibadah* (worship) as manifested in everyday life. Islamic character education is not solely oriented toward the acquisition of religious knowledge; rather, it emphasizes the formation of a Muslim personality reflected in students' moral, social, and spiritual conduct (Mahfud & Zahiyah, 2025). According to Al-Ghazali, character education in Islam aims to shape individuals with *akhlaq al-karimah* through continuous processes of habituation, role modeling, and the internalization of values. Within the context of formal education, Islamic character education is understood as a systematic effort by schools to instill Islamic values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, social concern, and spiritual piety (Musadad et al., 2025). These values cannot be effectively developed through normative instruction alone; instead, they must be brought to life through authentic practices embedded in the school environment. Therefore, Islamic character education requires an integrated approach that connects classroom learning, school culture, and the supportive roles of families and the wider community (Miftahuddin et al., 2024).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Learning in Elementary Schools

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in establishing the foundation of students' character and personality. At this developmental stage, students are in the early phase of moral development; consequently, PAI learning should not function solely as a means of knowledge transmission but also as a medium for value internalization and the habituation of religious behavior (Astuti et al., 2022). Ideally, PAI learning is designed holistically by integrating cognitive, affective, and

psychomotor dimensions. PAI teachers are therefore expected not only to master instructional content but also to serve as moral role models for students. Teachers' exemplary behavior in attitudes, interactions, and the consistent practice of Islamic values constitutes a critical factor in the success of character education. Accordingly, the effectiveness of PAI learning is highly dependent on the consistency between what is taught in the classroom and what is practiced in the daily life of the school environment (Sartika et al., 2024).

Theory of the Implementation of Islamic Character Education

The implementation of Islamic character education in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is grounded in several core principles, namely role modeling (*uswah*), habituation, value reinforcement, and environmental integration. Role modeling constitutes the central pillar of character education, as students tend to imitate the behavior of figures they perceive as significant, particularly teachers (Badri & Malik, 2024). Habituation is carried out through routine activities such as collective prayers, Qur'anic recitation (*tadarus*), congregational prayers, and the cultivation of polite and respectful behavior. Furthermore, educational ecology theory posits that character formation is shaped by the interaction between individuals and their surrounding environments, including the family, school, and broader community. Therefore, Islamic character education requires strong synergy among all stakeholders to ensure that the values instilled in schools are not contradicted by practices encountered in external environments (Komalasari & Yakubu, 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach using an intrinsic case study design. This approach was selected because the research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of Islamic character education within Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Sukasari State Elementary School as a specific social context with distinctive characteristics and dynamics. The case study design enables the researcher to explore processes, interactions, and the subjective experiences of teachers and students holistically, allowing the meanings and practices of Islamic character education to be comprehensively understood. A qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate, as the phenomenon under investigation is complex, contextual, and cannot be adequately reduced to purely quantitative measurements.

The study was conducted at Sukasari State Elementary School, located in Cileunyi District, Bandung Regency. This site was selected because the school has formally integrated Islamic character values into PAI learning; however, in practice, it continues to face various implementation challenges. Research participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement and understanding of Islamic character education practices. The participants consisted of one PAI teacher, one school principal, three homeroom teachers, and seven students from Grades IV–VI who actively participated in PAI learning. The number of participants was flexible and determined according to the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection was concluded when additional data no longer yielded new information.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of Islamic character education. Participant observation was conducted during PAI learning activities to examine teacher–student

interactions, instructional strategies, and the integration of Islamic character values, all of which were documented in systematic field notes. Document analysis included lesson plans (RPP), the school's vision and mission statements, and supporting documents related to character education programs, in order to identify alignment between formal policies and classroom practices. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke, which involves data familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and narrative construction (Ahmed et al., 2025). Source and method triangulation were applied to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the implementation of Islamic character education in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Sukasari State Elementary School demonstrates several important dynamics that reflect a gap between theoretical expectations and classroom practice. In general, PAI teachers make deliberate efforts to integrate Islamic values such as discipline, responsibility, and noble character into the learning process; however, their implementation often remains confined to cognitive aspects and administrative routines, without consistently penetrating students' affective dimensions. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that, although habituation strategies such as Qur'anic recitation and routine religious activities have been implemented, challenges in fostering religious character persist, particularly with regard to the consistency of value internalization beyond the classroom context (Khairani & Rosyidi, 2022).

Specifically, PAI teachers at Sukasari State Elementary School function not only as instructors but also as role models who exemplify religious behavior. However, this expectation is not always fully realized due to limited instructional time and a demanding curriculum load. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that teachers' roles as moral exemplars constitute a key factor in shaping students' religious character; nevertheless, the effectiveness of this role is highly dependent on contextual support, particularly from parents and the broader school environment. (Khairani & Rosyidi, 2022). The habituation of Islamic values such as the practice of reciting prayers before and after lessons, reading the Qur'an, and participating in religious activities was identified by participants as one of the strongest aspects of character education implementation. However, students' perceptions of these activities as mere formalities tend to reduce the effectiveness of value internalization, particularly when such practices are not accompanied by reflective and contextual understanding. This finding reinforces previous studies indicating that the implementation of character values must be closely linked to meaningful learning experiences in order to avoid becoming ritualistic practices devoid of deep comprehension (Carvina et al., 2023).

In addition, a clear value gap between the school and family environments was evident, as several students acknowledged that the Islamic values taught at school were not consistently reinforced at home. Parents often reported limited capacity to provide continuous moral role modeling due to work commitments and the pervasive influence of digital media in family life. This finding aligns with previous studies emphasizing that effective character education requires strong collaboration between schools and families; without value synchronization across these social contexts, school-based character education

efforts risk losing coherence and sustainability (Arifin & Pitriyanita, 2022; Mansur & Sholeh, 2024). In the context of the national curriculum, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has substantial potential for shaping students' character; however, the meaningful implementation of values remains uneven across elementary schools. The findings of this study support existing literature which emphasizes that character formation cannot rely solely on the transfer of knowledge, but must be cultivated through authentic experiences and consistent habituation within a holistic classroom and school environment.

From the students' perspective, Islamic character values tend to be more easily understood when they are practiced through concrete activities rather than conveyed solely through theoretical explanations or verbal instructions from teachers. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that experiential learning approaches such as the habituation of Qur'an recitation before lessons are effective in instilling discipline and Islamic values among students, as learners are directly engaged in learning processes that are meaningful and relevant to their everyday lives (Aini et al., 2024).

However, obstacles in the practice of Islamic character education at Sukasari State Elementary School also include students' low motivation to engage in certain habituation activities and the lack of synergy between teachers and parents in optimizing character education. These findings reinforce arguments in previous studies indicating that school parent collaboration needs to be strengthened to address the negative impacts of digital media exposure as well as other global challenges that influence students' moral development and discipline (Jannah, 2023; Khairani & Rosyidi, 2022).

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that Islamic character education at SDN Sukasari is fundamentally on the right track; however, it still requires stronger contextual and emotional reinforcement so that Islamic values are not merely understood at an intellectual level but are also internalized and lived out meaningfully by students. The recommendations derived from this study include strengthening dialogical approaches in learning, ensuring consistent habituation practices, and developing collaborative strategies between schools and families to enhance the holistic and sustainable implementation of Islamic character education.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the implementation of Islamic character education in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Sukasari Public Elementary School has been carried out through various forms of religious habituation and teacher role modeling. However, a noticeable gap remains between the ideal conceptual framework and classroom practice. Islamic character education tends to be stronger in the cognitive domain and formal routines, while the internalization of values in the affective and behavioral domains has not occurred consistently. The main factors influencing this condition include limited instructional time, curriculum workload, a lack of value continuity between school and family environments, and the pervasive influence of digital media on students' behavior. Nevertheless, experiential learning approaches and contextualized habituation activities have proven to be more effective in helping students meaningfully understand and internalize Islamic values.

From an implementation perspective, the findings underscore the importance of strengthening dialogical approaches in PAI instruction, ensuring consistent teacher role

modeling, and enhancing collaboration between schools and families to support holistic and sustainable Islamic character education. Schools are also encouraged to cultivate a school culture that supports emotional and social internalization of values, rather than relying solely on normative instruction. The limitations of this study include its focus on a single school context and a relatively limited number of participants, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to involve more diverse school settings and to explore more deeply the roles of family environments and digital media in shaping students' Islamic character development.

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