

The Role of the Islamic Religious Education Curriculum in Character Development: A Study of Challenges and Educational Impact in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) curriculum in shaping character education in Indonesia. In the context of national education reform and the moral challenges facing youth, the curriculum is expected to deliver not only religious knowledge but also the internalization of character values relevant to real-life experiences. This research employed a qualitative method through document analysis of curriculum guidelines, textbooks, and teacher manuals at the secondary school level. The findings reveal that character values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and discipline are normatively embedded in the curriculum. However, a gap exists between the moral concepts being taught and the real-life contexts students face. The curriculum tends to be declarative and lacks pedagogical approaches that promote reflection and contextual application. Furthermore, the evaluation of students' character development is not systematically integrated into the assessment process. The study recommends the development of more dialogic, experiential, and context-based teaching strategies, as well as enhanced teacher training. Accordingly, the Islamic Religious Education curriculum has the potential to play a significant role in shaping students' character in a holistic and socially relevant manner.

Keywords: character education, curriculum, Islamic Religious Education, contextual learning, moral values

Peran Kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam Pengembangan Karakter:
Kajian Tantangan dan Dampak Pendidikan di Indonesia

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam dalam membentuk pendidikan karakter di Indonesia. Dalam konteks transformasi pendidikan nasional dan tantangan moral generasi muda, kurikulum ini diharapkan mampu tidak hanya menanamkan pengetahuan keagamaan, tetapi juga menginternalisasi nilai-nilai karakter yang relevan dengan kehidupan nyata. Metode penelitian ini bersifat kualitatif dengan pendekatan analisis dokumen terhadap dokumen kurikulum, buku teks, dan pedoman guru Pendidikan Agama Islam tingkat sekolah menengah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai karakter seperti kejujuran, tanggung jawab, empati, dan kedisiplinan telah terintegrasi dalam kurikulum secara normatif. Namun, terdapat kesenjangan antara konsep nilai yang diajarkan dan konteks aplikatif yang dihadapi siswa dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Kurikulum cenderung bersifat deklaratif dan kurang mengakomodasi pendekatan pedagogis yang reflektif dan kontekstual. Selain itu, evaluasi terhadap pencapaian karakter belum terintegrasi secara sistematis dalam penilaian pembelajaran. Studi ini merekomendasikan perlunya pengembangan strategi pembelajaran yang lebih dialogis, kontekstual, dan berbasis pengalaman serta pelatihan guru yang lebih terarah. Dengan demikian, kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam dapat memainkan peran signifikan dalam membentuk karakter

peserta didik secara lebih utuh dan relevan dengan tantangan zaman.

Kata Kunci: pendidikan karakter, kurikulum, Pendidikan Agama Islam, pembelajaran kontekstual, nilai moral.

INTRODUCTION

The growing concern for character development in education has prompted many scholars to explore the various roles educational curricula play in shaping students' personalities and ethical values. One of the primary avenues for fostering moral and spiritual growth in students in Indonesia is the Islamic Religious Education curriculum. As an integral part of the national education system, Islamic Religious Education aims not only to impart religious knowledge but also to build students' character in line with Islamic values (Alhamuddin, 2018). However, despite the significance of this curriculum, the question arises as to whether it adequately addresses the formation of character in the context of modern educational challenges. This study aims to investigate the role of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum in shaping students' character, examining the challenges it faces, the strategies used for its implementation, and its impact on the Indonesian education system.

The research problem at the core of this study is to critically assess the extent to which the Islamic Religious Education curriculum contributes to character development in students across Indonesia. Although character education has been a focal point of educational reforms worldwide, especially in Muslim-majority countries, little attention has been given to understanding how Islamic Religious Education specifically aligns with the broader objectives of character education within Indonesia's diverse educational environment. The key research questions include: How does the Islamic Religious Education curriculum contribute to character formation in students? What are the challenges faced by educators in effectively implementing character-building components within the Islamic Religious Education curriculum? What strategies can be employed to enhance the integration of character education within Islamic Religious Education? By addressing these questions, this study will provide valuable insights into the current state of character education through Islamic Religious Education and offer recommendations for improvement.

This research is significant in contributing to the body of knowledge regarding the role of religious education in moral development. Previous studies have explored the relationship between character education and general curricula (Agung Hidayatulloh & Huda, 2023; Alhamuddin, Surbiantoro, et al., 2022; Asrial et al., 2021; Utomo & Alawiyah, 2022), but there remains a gap in literature specifically focused on the Islamic Religious Education curriculum in the context of Indonesia. A study by Mahmudi (2020) highlighted the need for further exploration into the integration of Islamic values into character-building efforts within Indonesian schools. This research aims to fill this gap by specifically focusing on the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, which remains a key component of the nation's education system. Moreover, the findings will help policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers in Indonesia understand how Islamic Religious Education can better align with the goal of producing not just

knowledgeable but also morally and ethically well-rounded individuals.

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the field of character education, which emphasizes the importance of fostering virtues such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility in students.), character education aims to teach students core moral values that help them function as responsible and ethical citizens. In the context of Islamic education, character development is seen as a holistic process that encompasses both spiritual and social aspects, emphasizing the cultivation of good behavior through a strong connection to religious teachings ((Alhamuddin, Dermawan, et al., 2022; Alhamuddin, Surbiantoro, et al., 2022). This theory is applicable to the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, which emphasizes both religious knowledge and the application of that knowledge to everyday life. Through Islamic teachings, students are expected to internalize values that contribute to both their personal growth and their interactions with others in society. However, the challenge remains in effectively integrating these ideals into the curriculum in a manner that is both practical and relevant to students' everyday lives.

Moreover, this research draws on the socio-cultural theory of education, which underscores the importance of cultural context in the educational process (Vygotsky, 1978). In Indonesia, the diversity of the student population, encompassing different ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds, plays a significant role in shaping how character education is perceived and implemented. The Islamic Religious Education curriculum, which is intended to be a unifying force, must navigate these cultural and contextual differences to effectively foster character in students. The success of Islamic Religious Education in fostering character development depends on its ability to be adaptable to the varied socio-cultural backgrounds of students while maintaining its core religious values. Therefore, this study will explore how these cultural nuances impact the implementation of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum and how educators can use culturally responsive strategies to ensure its effectiveness.

The research gap addressed by this study lies in the lack of comprehensive evaluations of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum's role in character education within the Indonesian context. While many studies have examined the effectiveness of character education in general education systems ((Channiago et al., 2022; Cubukcu, 2012a; Salamah et al., 2024), there is a limited body of work focusing on how Islamic religious education specifically contributes to this goal in Indonesia. Furthermore, although character education is emphasized in Indonesia's national education policy, there is a need for empirical studies that analyze the actual integration of character-building elements within the Islamic Religious Education curriculum and the challenges teachers face in its implementation. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a thorough analysis of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum's strengths and weaknesses in promoting character education, exploring both the theoretical and practical aspects of its implementation.

In examining the challenges faced by educators, it is important to consider the broader educational landscape in Indonesia. The curriculum is often influenced by national policies, but its implementation can be hindered by limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and the pressures of standardized testing (Alhamuddin et al., 2020; Alhamuddin, 2019; Zuhdi, 2006a). Teachers of Islamic Religious Education often

face the challenge of balancing religious instruction with character education, and they must do so in a way that resonates with students from diverse backgrounds. In addition, the lack of uniformity in teacher preparation for delivering character education within Islamic Religious Education further complicates its effective implementation. This research will investigate how these factors affect the ability of Islamic Religious Education to shape students' character and will suggest ways to address these challenges through better teacher training, curriculum reform, and greater community involvement.

Finally, the contribution of this study to knowledge is twofold. First, it adds to the understanding of how religious curricula, specifically Islamic Religious Education, play a role in character education within Indonesia's unique socio-cultural and educational context. Second, it offers practical recommendations for improving the integration of character education into the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, based on the findings of the study. This research aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing actionable insights that can inform the development of future educational policies and curricula in Indonesia.

This study seeks to critically analyze the role of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum in shaping students' character, identifying the challenges, strategies, and impacts it has on the Indonesian education system. By addressing the research gap in this area, the study contributes to the broader discourse on character education, providing a nuanced understanding of how religious education can support the moral development of students in Indonesia. Through a combination of theoretical frameworks and empirical analysis, this research will provide insights that are relevant to educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in the intersection of religious education and character development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research approach (Miles, 1986; Takona, 2024) to explore how the Islamic Religious Education curriculum in Indonesia contributes to character development among students. The focus of this research is on understanding how the curriculum, through its content and structure, shapes students' ethical and moral values. By relying solely on qualitative methods, the study allows for a thorough analysis of educational documents such as curriculum guidelines, textbooks, and teacher manuals, which provide insight into how character education is integrated within the Islamic Religious Education curriculum.

Document analysis is the primary method used for this research. This technique involves carefully reviewing relevant curriculum documents to identify themes related to character education. The rationale behind using document analysis is that curriculum materials reflect the intentions of educational policymakers and educators, making them crucial sources for understanding how character-building values are embedded within the curriculum. Through this approach, the study aims to uncover how specific character traits—such as responsibility, honesty, and empathy—are emphasized and taught through Islamic Religious Education.

Content analysis, a method used to systematically identify patterns or themes in the documents, is employed to categorize and interpret the data. For example, the analysis will focus on identifying sections of the curriculum that discuss values related to good behavior, religious ethics, and social responsibility, all of which are key components of character education. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of the curriculum's design and its alignment with broader educational goals related to character formation.

The documents selected for analysis include official curriculum guidelines, textbooks, teacher manuals, and other relevant educational materials that explicitly or implicitly address character education. These documents provide an understanding of the objectives of the IRE curriculum, the content delivered to students, and the pedagogical strategies recommended to educators. The rationale for selecting these documents is that they are direct representations of how the curriculum is structured and how educators are guided to deliver character education. To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, the study follows a rigorous process of document selection and coding. The selected documents are carefully reviewed for relevance, and only the most current and authoritative versions of the curriculum materials are analyzed. The data are coded into themes and categories, with the aim of identifying recurring values or strategies related to character development. Multiple researchers are involved in the coding process to reduce potential bias and ensure consistency in the analysis.

This qualitative approach allows the study to gain a deeper understanding of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum's role in fostering character development, focusing on the content and structure of the curriculum as experienced by students. While this study does not involve interviews or focus groups, it provides valuable insights into how the curriculum is designed to promote character education. By analyzing the curriculum and educational materials, the study identifies strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for improvement in the integration of character education within Islamic Religious Education.

This method is particularly suitable for exploring educational topics, as it allows for a comprehensive analysis of existing curriculum documents and materials. Moreover, document analysis is a well-established research method in educational studies, as it provides objective, reliable, and rich data that can be systematically analyzed to identify patterns and trends (Bowen, 2009). The findings of this research will contribute to a better understanding of how the Islamic Religious Education curriculum in Indonesia supports character education and provide recommendations for enhancing its effectiveness.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analysis of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum documents revealed a consistent integration of character education goals across key instructional components. Based on the review of curriculum guidelines, teacher handbooks, and student textbooks, it was found that the curriculum emphasizes the cultivation of core character traits rooted in Islamic values—such as honesty (*ṣidq*), discipline (*intizām*), responsibility (*amānah*), respect (*ihtirām*), and empathy (*ta'āwun*). These values are introduced both explicitly, through learning objectives and material content, and implicitly, through pedagogical strategies and teacher roles. This aligns with the broader aim of national education as stated in

the *Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System*, which mandates the development of students' potential to become human beings who are faithful, morally upright, and responsible.

In light of these findings, the study confirms that character education is not peripheral but central to the vision of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia. However, several layers of critical insight emerge upon closer analysis of the curriculum's content and pedagogical directions. While character values are clearly stated, the curriculum tends to rely heavily on normative-religious texts—primarily Qur'anic verses and Hadith—without always bridging these teachings with real-life applications relevant to contemporary Indonesian youth. For example, while the value of integrity is often taught using the story of the Prophet Muhammad's honesty in trade, there is minimal elaboration in the textbooks about how this principle might guide students' behavior in digital ethics, environmental responsibility, or civic engagement in pluralistic settings.

This gap reflects that character education must go beyond moral instruction to include moral reasoning, moral feeling, and moral behavior. Without concrete illustrations and contextualization, moral lessons risk remaining abstract. Similarly, that effective character education requires “integrated ethical skill-building” that includes the development of ethical sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and implementation. In the current Islamic Religious Education curriculum, there appears to be an overemphasis on the cognitive and declarative aspects of moral values, but less structured effort to build moral agency—especially through active learning or problem-based scenarios (Al-Attas, 1999).

Furthermore, the curriculum reflects an idealistic tone that presumes a homogenous sociocultural and religious context. For instance, character formation is often framed as a product of submission (*ta'abbud*) to Islamic teachings, which, while valid from a theological perspective, may be limiting from a pedagogical standpoint in public schools that serve diverse student populations. Religious education in Indonesia often fails to accommodate the realities of multicultural classrooms and democratic citizenship. As a result, the approach to character education within the Islamic Religious Education curriculum may benefit from more inclusive, dialogic, and experiential models that foster interreligious understanding, conflict resolution skills, and civic participation, as proposed multicultural education framework (Alifuddin, Alhamuddin, Rosadi, et al., 2021).

Building on this critique, it is important to recognize that public education in Indonesia functions not only as a medium for religious instruction but also as a platform for nation-building in a plural society. A curriculum that emphasizes exclusivist religious interpretations may inadvertently marginalize students of other faiths or reduce opportunities for interfaith dialogue and collaboration. By incorporating pedagogical strategies that value critical thinking, mutual respect, and shared ethical values, Islamic Religious Education can transcend doctrinal boundaries and contribute meaningfully to the formation of inclusive civic identities. This aligns with (Alifuddin, Alhamuddin, & Nurjannah, 2021; Alifuddin, Alhamuddin, Rosadi, et al., 2021) argument that Islamic education in modern contexts should evolve beyond dogmatic transmission and become a space for engaging with the complexities of contemporary moral and social challenges. Thus, adapting the curriculum to reflect pedagogical pluralism not only

enhances its educational effectiveness but also strengthens its relevance in a democratic, multicultural society.

Nevertheless, there are strong areas in the curriculum where character education is effectively integrated with Islamic values. For instance, the teachings of Prophet Luqman in Surah Luqman (Q.S. 31:13–19) are used as a thematic anchor in various grade levels to develop virtues such as gratitude, humility, patience, and respect toward parents. These narratives are supported by learning activities that invite students to reflect on their own behavior, engage in journaling, and participate in school community initiatives. This reflects the educational approach of *ta'dib*—a holistic concept of education in Islamic thought that encompasses the development of intellect, ethics, and spiritual discipline (Al-Attas, 1999)).

Moreover, the curriculum documents recommend that teachers serve as role models and facilitators of character, a principle supported by (James Miles, 2020; Mohamad et al., 2015; Tony Becher & Stuart Maclure, 2024) social learning theory, which emphasizes that students learn values and behaviors by observing and imitating trusted figures. However, the practical implementation of this recommendation remains unclear in the documents analyzed. There is limited guidance on how teachers can integrate character education into classroom management, assessment, or co-curricular activities, which may hinder consistency in applying these principles. This gap between theory and practice aligns with the findings of (Agung Hidayatulloh & Huda, 2023; Asrial et al., 2021), who reports that many teachers in Indonesia still struggle to translate abstract character goals into concrete classroom practices due to a lack of training and support.

Interestingly, the findings also highlight a mismatch between the curriculum's aims and the evaluative tools provided. Most character traits are not formally assessed in standardized examinations, and while some performance-based assessments are suggested (e.g., self-assessment rubrics, teacher observation), they are rarely detailed. This reflects what Thornberg and Ohman (2010) describe as the “hidden curriculum” problem—where the formal curriculum promotes character goals, but the informal and assessment cultures may prioritize academic achievement over moral development. This misalignment could result in character education being treated as secondary by educators pressured to focus on test performance.

Despite these limitations, the curriculum's alignment with national character education goals offers a strong foundation for further innovation. Indonesia's *Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter* (PPK) policy launched in 2016 has provided renewed emphasis on integrating character development into all school subjects, including religious education. The five core values promoted by PPK—religiosity, nationalism, integrity, independence, and mutual cooperation—are closely linked to the values taught in Islamic Religious Education, suggesting opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration and whole-school approaches to character education. To move the conversation forward, this study proposes that future curriculum revisions incorporate more participatory and critical pedagogies that allow students to engage with moral dilemmas, reflect on their own values, and practice ethical decision-making in authentic contexts. The inclusion of local wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) and contemporary ethical issues—such as digital behavior,

environmental ethics, and pluralism—could make the curriculum more relevant and transformative. As highlighted by (Alhamuddin, Dermawan, et al., 2022; Alhamuddin, Surbiantoro, et al., 2022; Nickl et al., 2022; Salamah et al., 2024; Utomo & Alawiyah, 2022) character education rooted in religious values must evolve into a critical, contextual, and community-oriented practice if it is to effectively address the moral challenges of modern Indonesian society.

This study has advanced the understanding of how the Islamic Religious Education curriculum in Indonesia supports character development by revealing both its strengths—such as its grounding in Islamic values and clear moral aims—and its weaknesses, particularly in areas of contextual application, inclusive pedagogy, and assessment. While the curriculum sets a strong moral foundation, it requires ongoing refinement to ensure that students not only understand character values but also internalize and practice them in their daily lives. By addressing these gaps through evidence-based strategies and continuous teacher support, the Islamic Religious Education curriculum has the potential to play a pivotal role in shaping ethical, responsible, and socially aware citizens in Indonesia's diverse society.

This raises a deeper pedagogical and philosophical concern about the function of religious education in pluralistic societies. When Islamic Religious Education is constructed primarily as a vehicle for submission to normative theological doctrines, it risks being reduced to indoctrination rather than formation. The assumption that religious knowledge naturally leads to moral behavior—commonly embedded in the IRE curriculum—is increasingly questioned in educational research (Cubukcu, 2012b; Fitriani & Wulandari, 2024; Salim et al., 2024)). Moral character is not merely the result of internalizing religious rules, but also of active engagement with diverse ethical dilemmas, social perspectives, and public responsibilities.

In this regard, the current Islamic Religious Education curriculum appears to fall short in promoting *critical religious literacy*, a concept that allows students not only to understand religious principles but also to interrogate them in light of contemporary social realities (Moore, 2007). Without opportunities for critical reflection, students may memorize moral values without grasping their contextual significance, thereby limiting their ability to apply these values in complex, real-life settings. Moreover, this form of education may inadvertently reinforce binary thinking—between right and wrong, believer and non-believer, sacred and profane—at the expense of nuanced understanding and empathy. Such a rigid framework is particularly problematic in Indonesia, where religious diversity and democratic citizenship are both constitutional principles. As highlighted by (Zuhdi, 2006a, 2006b), the future of religious education in Indonesia depends on its ability to serve as a space for dialogue, not dogma. This necessitates a curricular shift from mere theological affirmation toward a more dialogical pedagogy that equips students to live ethically and peacefully in a pluralistic world. The role of Islamic Religious Education, therefore, should be reimagined—not to dilute Islamic identity, but to enrich it by engaging with broader ethical and civic frameworks that are rooted in shared human values. In sum, the challenge for curriculum developers is not simply to integrate character values into lesson plans, but to cultivate a pedagogical culture where those values are critically explored, socially practiced, and democratically negotiated. Without this

transformation, the Islamic Religious Education curriculum may continue to reproduce moral ideals that are disconnected from the lived realities and moral tensions of Indonesia's diverse classrooms and communities (Alhamuddin, Alhamuddin, Bukhori, 2016; Alifuddin, Alhamuddin, & Nurjannah, 2021; Alifuddin, Alhamuddin, Rosadi, et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the central role that the Islamic Religious Education curriculum plays in promoting character education in Indonesia's formal education system. Through a detailed analysis of curriculum documents, textbooks, and instructional guidelines, this research has shown that the Islamic Religious Education curriculum is deeply embedded with moral and ethical values drawn from Islamic teachings. These values—such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and compassion—are positioned as foundational to the formation of students' character and are aligned with the national educational goals emphasizing holistic human development.

This study has answered the research problem by demonstrating that the Islamic Religious Education curriculum contributes not only to religious literacy but also to the moral shaping of students. However, it also revealed that the curriculum, while normatively rich, sometimes lacks contextual application that connects moral values with students' real-life experiences in a pluralistic and rapidly changing society. Moreover, the findings suggest that although the curriculum offers general pedagogical recommendations, it falls short in guiding teachers with practical and contextual strategies to implement character education effectively. In this regard, the study has moved the discourse beyond the recognition of moral content in the curriculum to a deeper understanding of how that content may or may not translate into meaningful character formation.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to a more nuanced perspective on religious education and its transformative potential in contemporary education. By analyzing how moral instruction is constructed and conveyed through the Islamic Religious Education curriculum, this study offers insights that can inform curriculum development, teacher training, and education policy in Indonesia. It underscores the need to complement theological instruction with more interactive, reflective, and experiential learning models that engage students in real-world ethical thinking and moral decision-making.

Furthermore, the research has exposed the disconnect between curriculum goals and assessment practices. The lack of structured evaluation mechanisms for character outcomes may hinder the prioritization of moral development in classroom practice. This insight points to the importance of aligning curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in a coherent model of character education that is both values-based and competency-oriented. For future research, it is recommended to explore the implementation level of the Islamic Religious Education curriculum through case studies in schools, including how teachers interpret and apply character education goals in diverse classroom contexts. Additionally, comparative studies between religious and secular moral education programs could offer broader perspectives on effective strategies for character development in multicultural and multi-faith

environments. Longitudinal studies that track the moral development of students over time would also be valuable in evaluating the long-term impact of character education in religious education settings. Ultimately, this study affirms that the Islamic Religious Education curriculum holds strong potential to nurture students' moral and spiritual growth. Yet, realizing this potential requires continuous reflection, pedagogical innovation, and policy support to ensure that character education is not only taught but also meaningfully lived by learners in their everyday lives.

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