

Character Development in Early Childhood through Religious Activity Programs at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the development of early childhood character through religious activity programs at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan. A qualitative approach with a case study design was employed. The research participants consisted of the principal, classroom teachers, and early childhood learners selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking. The findings revealed that the religious activity program was systematically implemented through daily practices such as greeting with Islamic salutations, reciting daily prayers, memorizing short Qur'anic chapters, performing *Dhuha* prayer, Friday charity (*infaq*), and other Islamic activities integrated into daily learning. These activities contributed to the development of children's religious character, discipline, responsibility, honesty, social care, politeness, and independence. The program's success was supported by teacher consistency, exemplary role modeling, a religious school culture, and collaboration between the school and parents. Meanwhile, challenges included differences in parenting styles, limited religious habituation at home, and variations in children's developmental levels. The study concludes that religious activity programs are an effective strategy for developing early childhood character through consistent habituation and exemplary practices, enabling children to internalize Islamic values in their daily behavior.

Keywords: Early Childhood Character, Religious Activities, Habituation, Islamic Education, Character Education.

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Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) represents a critical stage in children's development, as this period corresponds to the *golden age*, during which children are highly receptive to environmental stimulation. One of the primary objectives of early childhood education is character development. Character encompasses not only cognitive competencies but also the moral, social, and spiritual values that serve as the foundation of an individual's personal and social life. Therefore, character education should be introduced from an early age through carefully planned and continuously implemented educational activities.

Within the framework of Islamic education, character development extends beyond the cultivation of socially appropriate behavior to include the formation of noble moral character (*akhlak*) grounded in Islamic values. Religious character constitutes a fundamental component of Islamic early childhood education because religious values are believed to nurture individuals who are faithful, pious, and morally upright. The development of religious character can be facilitated through various educational approaches, one of which is the implementation of religious activity programs that are systematically integrated into children's daily learning experiences.

Religious activity programs in early childhood education institutions encompass a variety of activities designed to instill Islamic values in young children. These activities include the habituation of daily prayers, Qur'anic recitation, the practice of Islamic worship, and other learning experiences that promote moral and spiritual values. Such programs function not merely as routine activities but also as effective means of internalizing character values through children's direct participation and authentic experiences. Through consistent habituation, children are expected to develop religious awareness, discipline, responsibility, and social concern as essential components of their character.

Previous studies have shown that religious activity programs implemented in a structured and sustainable manner positively contribute to character development among young children. These programs enable children to understand and internalize moral and spiritual values more concretely through repeated practice and meaningful experiences. Furthermore, teachers' roles as moral role models, together with a religiously supportive learning environment, constitute essential factors influencing the success of character education programs.

Despite these potential benefits, the implementation of religious activity programs in early childhood education continues to face several challenges. These include limited variation in instructional methods, inadequate educational facilities and learning resources, and differences in children's developmental backgrounds and family environments. Consequently, the process of character development is not always implemented optimally across educational settings.

RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan, an Islamic-based early childhood education institution, has established a comprehensive religious activity program as an integral component of its educational process. The program is designed to foster children's character through a series of structured and routinely implemented religious activities that promote both moral and spiritual development. This distinctive educational practice provides an important context for examining how religious activity programs contribute to character formation during early childhood.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze the development of early childhood character through religious activity programs at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the advancement of character education models grounded in religious values while also providing practical recommendations for educators in designing effective, meaningful, and value-oriented learning programs for young children.

Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Character Development in Early Childhood

Character refers to a set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that distinguish individuals in their interactions with others and their surrounding environment. Within the educational context, character development involves cultivating personality traits that reflect moral and ethical values. According to Zubaedi (2011), character education aims not only to develop intellectually competent individuals but also to foster moral integrity and social responsibility.

In early childhood, character is primarily developed through habituation, role modeling, and direct experiences. Hurlock (1978) argues that children's moral development is strongly influenced by their interactions with the social environment, particularly within the family and school contexts. Therefore, a supportive learning environment enriched with positive values is essential for facilitating children's character formation.

Furthermore, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud, 2014) emphasizes that early childhood education should promote religious and moral values as fundamental aspects of children's overall development. Consequently, character education in early childhood should be implemented systematically and integrated into daily learning activities rather than being treated as a separate instructional component.

2.2. Religious Activity Programs in Early Childhood Education

Religious activity programs consist of a series of educational activities designed to instill religious values in young children. Within Islamic early childhood education institutions, these programs constitute an integral part of the curriculum aimed at fostering children's religious character and moral development.

Religious activities commonly implemented in early childhood education include the habituation of daily prayers, Qur'anic recitation, the practice of Islamic worship, and activities that promote moral values such as honesty, discipline, and social responsibility. According to Sujiono (2013), habituation activities conducted routinely and consistently enable children to internalize the values being taught more effectively through repeated practice.

In addition to promoting religious values, these programs also contribute to children's social-emotional development by fostering empathy, cooperation, responsibility, and respect for others. A religiously supportive learning environment provides authentic opportunities for children to apply Islamic values in their everyday lives, thereby strengthening both their moral and spiritual development.

2.3. Character Development through Religious Habituation

Habituation is widely recognized as one of the most effective approaches to character development during early childhood. Through repeated practice, children gradually acquire positive behaviors that eventually become stable habits. Within the context of religious education, habituation is implemented through structured daily activities that consistently incorporate Islamic values into children's learning experiences.

Suyadi (2010) explains that habituation is a continuous educational process through which repeated behaviors gradually become permanent behavioral patterns. Similarly, Wiyani (2013) emphasizes that the effectiveness of habituation depends largely on consistency, positive role modeling, and the presence of a supportive educational environment.

From the perspective of Islamic education, habituation plays a central role in the cultivation of *akhlaq* (moral character). Religious values are transmitted not only through theoretical instruction but also through continuous practice in everyday life. This perspective suggests that the development of religious character requires a holistic and sustainable educational approach that integrates cognitive understanding with behavioral practice.

2.4. Theoretical Perspective: Behaviorism and Character Education

From a theoretical perspective, character development through religious activity programs can be explained using behaviorist learning theory. Behaviorism proposes that behavior is acquired and strengthened through repetition and reinforcement. Within the context of religious habituation, positive reinforcement—such as praise, encouragement, and recognition—increases the likelihood that children will repeat desirable behaviors and gradually internalize them as part of their daily routines.

In addition to behaviorism, the character education approach emphasizes the integration of moral values into every aspect of the educational process. Character education extends beyond the development of cognitive competencies to include affective and behavioral dimensions. Consequently, religious activity programs provide an effective strategy for integrating moral, spiritual, and social values into children's everyday experiences, thereby promoting holistic character development from an early age.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the process of character development among young children through religious activity programs. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to explore the meanings, processes, and lived experiences occurring naturally within the educational setting, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of religious activity programs at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan.

The research was conducted at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan, with participants consisting of classroom teachers, young children, and the school principal. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on the consideration that they possessed relevant knowledge and experience related to the research focus. The teachers served as the implementers of the religious activity programs, the children were the primary subjects for observing character development, and the principal acted as a supporting informant by providing information regarding institutional policies and the implementation of the program.

The study focused on four main aspects: (1) the implementation of religious activity programs, (2) the forms of character demonstrated by the children, (3) the role of these programs in promoting character development, and (4) the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting program implementation. Through this focus, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of religious activity programs in fostering character development during early childhood.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Passive participant observation was conducted to examine the implementation of religious activities and to observe children's behavior throughout the learning process. In-depth interviews were carried out with teachers and the school principal to obtain detailed information regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the religious activity programs. Documentary evidence, including lesson plans, activity schedules, photographs, and children's developmental records, was also collected to support and corroborate the research findings.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction involved selecting, organizing, and focusing on information relevant to the research objectives. The reduced data were then presented in descriptive narrative form to facilitate interpretation and analysis. Conclusions were drawn continuously throughout the research process and were verified against the collected evidence to ensure the credibility of the findings.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the study employed source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from teachers, the school principal, and observational data, while methodological

triangulation involved comparing findings derived from observations, interviews, and documentary evidence. In addition, member checking was carried out by confirming the research findings with the participants to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the collected data.

Results

4.1. Implementation of Religious Activity Programs at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan

The findings indicate that the religious activity program at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan has become an integral component of the daily learning process. Classroom observations revealed that religious activities are systematically planned and implemented from the moment children arrive at school until the completion of the instructional day. The program is designed not only to introduce children to Islamic worship practices but also to cultivate religious character, discipline, responsibility, and positive social behavior.

The daily program begins with children greeting and shaking hands with their teachers, followed by reciting prayers before entering the classroom. Once all children have gathered, the teacher leads opening activities that include collective prayers, memorization of short Qur'anic chapters (*surahs*), recitation of the *Asmaul Husna* (the Beautiful Names of Allah), reading simple prophetic traditions (*hadith*), and introductory learning activities that consistently integrate Islamic values into classroom instruction.

Interviews with classroom teachers revealed that these activities have evolved into an established school culture implemented consistently every day. The teachers emphasized that character development cannot be achieved solely through direct instruction but requires continuous habituation to enable children to internalize religious values in their everyday behavior. They further explained that young children learn more effectively through direct experiences than through verbal explanations alone. This finding supports Suyadi (2010), who argues that habituation is one of the most effective strategies for character education in early childhood because children's behavior develops through the consistent repetition of meaningful activities.

The principal of RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan explained that all religious activity programs have been incorporated into the school curriculum as part of the daily instructional process. These activities include daily prayer routines, memorization of short Qur'anic chapters, *Dhuha* prayer practice, Friday charity (*Infaq Friday*), greeting habits, maintaining school cleanliness as an expression of Islamic teachings, and the commemoration of Islamic religious events. According to the principal, these programs are intended not only to improve children's religious knowledge but also to cultivate habitual behaviors that reflect Islamic moral values from an early age.

Documentary evidence confirmed that all religious activities are incorporated into the Daily Lesson Plan (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran Harian*—RPPH) and the school's academic calendar. Photographic documentation showed children actively participating in prayers, Qur'anic memorization, congregational prayer, and charitable activities under teachers' guidance.

These findings suggest that the religious activity program at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan is far more than a series of routine religious practices; rather, it represents a systematic character education strategy implemented through continuous habituation and teacher role modeling. This finding is consistent with Morrison (2012), who argues that consistent routines in early childhood education provide children with a sense of security while gradually promoting the development of positive behavioral patterns.

4.2. Forms of Character Developed through Religious Activity Programs

Observational findings demonstrated that the religious activity program contributed to the development of multiple positive character traits among young children. The most prominent characteristics included religiosity, discipline, responsibility, politeness, social empathy, honesty, and independence.

Religious character was reflected in children's habitual use of Islamic greetings, recitation of prayers before and after daily activities, participation in *Dhuha* prayer, and their ability to memorize several short Qur'anic chapters and daily supplications. More importantly, children gradually developed an understanding that acts of worship constitute an integral part of everyday life.

Discipline was demonstrated through punctual school attendance, adherence to daily schedules, compliance with classroom rules, orderly classroom behavior, and persistence in completing assigned tasks. Teachers reported that at the beginning of the semester several children frequently arrived late or experienced difficulty following classroom rules. However, continuous habituation resulted in significant behavioral improvement over time.

Responsibility also developed positively throughout the program. Children became accustomed to organizing their learning materials, returning toys after use, maintaining classroom cleanliness, and completing assigned tasks independently. Meanwhile, social responsibility and empathy were fostered through activities such as sharing food, participating in Friday charity, assisting classmates experiencing difficulties, expressing gratitude, and apologizing after making mistakes. Teachers explained that these activities were intentionally designed to introduce children to the concept of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) from an early age.

These findings support Wiyani (2013), who argues that children's character develops through continuous habituation within a supportive educational environment. Likewise, Hurlock (1978) emphasizes that children's moral development is strongly influenced by social interactions and everyday experiences.

4.3. The Role of Religious Activity Programs in Character Development

The findings demonstrate that religious activity programs play a pivotal role in promoting character development among young children at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan. Four major functions were identified.

4.3.1. A Medium for Internalizing Islamic Values

Religious activity programs provide children with opportunities to learn and practice Islamic teachings through authentic daily experiences. Rather than merely acquiring theoretical knowledge about religious practices, children gradually develop the habit of applying Islamic values in everyday life. Teachers emphasized that Islamic education is not limited to memorization but aims to cultivate behaviors such as honesty, respect for teachers, compassion toward peers, and environmental cleanliness as manifestations of faith.

This finding is consistent with Ismaraidha et al. (2024), who argue that the internalization of religious values is more effectively achieved through school culture and habitual practice than through conceptual instruction alone.

4.3.2. A Means of Habituating Positive Behavior

The program also functions as a mechanism for cultivating positive habits. Because religious activities are repeated consistently each day, children gradually perform desirable behaviors spontaneously without requiring teacher prompts. Classroom observations indicated that most children automatically recited prayers before meals, greeted others upon entering a room, and expressed *Alhamdulillah* after completing activities. These spontaneous behaviors demonstrate that Islamic values have gradually become integrated into children's daily conduct.

According to Sujiono (2013), habituation is among the most appropriate instructional strategies for early childhood because young children primarily learn through imitation and concrete experiences.

4.3.3. A Medium for Teacher Role Modeling

Teachers serve as behavioral role models throughout the implementation of religious activities. Children carefully observe how teachers communicate, pray, perform acts of worship, and interact with others. Observations revealed that teachers consistently demonstrated expected behaviors before asking children to imitate them. Such role modeling accelerated character development because children naturally imitate adults whom they perceive as authoritative and trustworthy.

This finding aligns with Social Learning Theory, which posits that behavior develops through observation and imitation of significant role models.

4.4. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Program Implementation

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of religious activity programs is influenced by both facilitating and constraining factors. Supporting factors include teachers' consistency in implementing habituation activities, the principal's commitment to character education, a religious school environment, adequate worship facilities, and strong parental involvement in reinforcing religious practices at home. Collaboration between the school and families enables character values introduced in school to be continuously practiced within children's everyday environments, thereby strengthening the process of value internalization.

Conversely, several challenges were identified. These include differences in parenting styles, limited religious habituation within the home environment, young children's relatively short attention spans, and variations in developmental readiness among children. Teachers explained that some children required a longer period to adapt to school routines because they had not previously experienced similar religious practices within their families.

In addition, the relatively large number of students required teachers to provide individualized attention to children who experienced difficulties participating in religious activities. To address these challenges, teachers implemented individualized guidance, provided positive reinforcement, and maintained continuous communication with parents regarding children's character development.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the religious activity program at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan effectively promotes character development through continuous habituation, teacher role modeling, and the cultivation of a religious school culture. The program's success depends not only on the quality of its implementation within the school but also on the synergy among schools, families, and the wider community in instilling Islamic values from an early age. These findings reinforce the view that character education in early childhood is most effective when children acquire values through authentic experiences that are practiced consistently over time rather than through classroom instruction alone.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the religious activity program at RA Al-Khairat Kotanopan plays a significant role in fostering character development among young children through a well-planned, systematic, and sustainable process of habituation. The program is implemented through a variety of religious activities, including greeting practices (*salām*), daily prayers, memorization of short Qur'anic chapters, *Dhuha* prayer, Friday charity (*Infaq Friday*), and other Islamic activities that are fully integrated into the daily learning process. The consistent

implementation of these activities enables religious values to be understood not only conceptually but also to be internalized through children's direct experiences.

The findings indicate that the program successfully promotes various positive character traits, including religiosity, discipline, responsibility, honesty, social empathy, politeness, and independence. Character development occurs through the integration of habituation, teacher role modeling, positive reinforcement, and the establishment of a religious school culture. Teachers play a central role in guiding children to practice Islamic values in their daily lives, enabling these values to become enduring behavioral habits rather than temporary classroom practices.

The successful implementation of the program is supported by teachers' and school leaders' commitment, a conducive learning environment, adequate educational facilities, and strong collaboration between the school and parents. Nevertheless, several challenges remain, including differences in parenting practices, limited religious habituation at home, and variations in children's developmental readiness and self-regulation. These findings suggest that effective character education through religious activity programs requires sustained collaboration among schools, families, and the wider community to ensure that character values become an integral part of children's personalities.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the view that habituation and teacher role modeling constitute effective strategies for character education in Islamic early childhood education. Practically, the findings provide valuable guidance for Islamic early childhood education institutions, particularly *Raudhatul Athfal* (RA) and Islamic kindergartens, in designing more systematic, innovative, and holistic religious activity programs. Furthermore, this study offers directions for future research by encouraging investigations involving a broader range of educational institutions and the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of character development in early childhood education.

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