

The Internalization of Students' Religious Culture as an Effort to Strengthen Character Education at SMP Negeri 1 Beringin, Deli Serdang

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the internalization of students' religious culture as an effort to strengthen character education at SMP Negeri 1 Beringin, Deli Serdang. The research employed a qualitative descriptive approach with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings indicate that religious culture was internalized through three main patterns: habituation of religious practices, exemplary behavior by teachers and school leaders, and integration of religious values into school activities. These patterns contributed to strengthening students' discipline, responsibility, respect, honesty, and social awareness. The study also found that the success of religious culture internalization was influenced by school consistency, teacher involvement, student participation, and parental support. However, challenges remained in maintaining students' motivation and ensuring that religious practices were not merely procedural. This study concludes that religious culture can become an effective character education strategy when implemented systematically, reflectively, and collaboratively.

Keywords: *Religious Culture; Character Education; Internalization; Students; School Habituation*

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Introduction

Strengthening character education is a strategic agenda in the Indonesian education system because schools do not merely function as spaces for knowledge transfer, but also as social institutions that shape students' personalities, morality, and behavior. In the context of primary and secondary education, character formation becomes increasingly important because students are in a developmental phase that is vulnerable to social change, technological influence, peer interaction, and a crisis of role models. Therefore, schools need to establish an educational ecosystem that not only emphasizes academic achievement but also develops concrete moral habits in everyday life (Ningsih, 2015).

Normatively, the Strengthening of Character Education has obtained a policy foundation through Presidential Regulation Number 87 of 2017 concerning the Strengthening of Character Education, which has been in force since 6 September 2017. This regulation positions educational institutions as responsible parties in strengthening students' character through the harmonization of spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical development by involving families and communities. This provision was further clarified through the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture Number 20 of 2018 concerning the Strengthening of Character Education in Formal Education Units, which has been in force since 21 June 2018. These two policies indicate that character education is not an additional program, but an integral part of educational implementation (Menteri, 2018).

One important dimension of character education is religious culture. Religious culture in schools can be understood as a system of values, habits, symbols, practices, and social interactions that reflect religious teachings and shape students' behavior. The internalization of religious culture is relevant because religious values cannot be taught only cognitively through school subjects. They need to be habituated, exemplified, and brought to life within the school culture. Thus, students do not merely know good values, but are also able to feel, accept, and implement these values in concrete actions (Indarwati, 2020).

The urgency of religious culture is also aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile, which places the dimension of "faith in and devotion to God Almighty and noble character" as one of the main characteristics of Indonesian students. This dimension includes religious morality, personal morality, morality toward others, morality toward nature, and morality toward the state. Within this framework, religious culture does not only refer to religious rituals, but also to the formation of social ethics, discipline, responsibility, care, and respect for others (Manda Nurhidayanti¹, Sima Mulyadi, 2025).

SMP Negeri 1 Beringin Deli Serdang provides a relevant context for study because junior high school represents an important transitional phase in the formation of students' identities. During this phase, students begin to develop moral awareness, patterns of social interaction, and more independent behavioral orientations. This study focuses on how religious culture is internalized, what forms of character strengthening emerge, and what supporting and inhibiting factors influence its implementation.

Literature Review

A. The Concept of Internalizing Religious Culture in Schools

Internalization is the process of embedding values from the external environment into an individual's awareness, attitudes, and behavior. In the educational context, internalization does not stop at the delivery of information, but includes habituation, appreciation, acceptance, and implementation of values. Values that have been internalized will appear in relatively consistent behavior, not only because of teacher supervision or school rules. Therefore, the internalization of religious culture should be viewed as a pedagogical process that takes place through repeated experience, social relationships, role modeling, and the reinforcement of school norms (Ismaraidha, 2024).

Religious culture in schools refers to the atmosphere, habits, rules, symbols, and institutional practices that reflect religious values. Its forms may include praying before and

after learning activities, reciting holy verses, congregational prayer, commemorating religious holidays, charity activities, moral guidance, polite greetings, the culture of saying salam, and the habit of maintaining cleanliness as part of faith-based values. Religious culture may also appear in daily interactions, such as respecting teachers, honoring peers, maintaining proper speech, being honest, and showing responsibility toward school assignments.

From an educational perspective, religious culture has a formative function because it creates an environment that supports students' moral development. Religious values that are consistently presented in school life can help students understand the relationship between religious teachings and social behavior. Thus, religiosity is not only understood as ritual activity, but also as an ethical foundation for conduct. Schools with a strong religious culture usually do not rely solely on Religious Education subjects. They build a value-based ecosystem involving the principal, teachers, education personnel, students, and parents (Khoiril Mustofa, 2024).

The internalization of religious culture also requires a gradual process. The first stage is value transformation, namely the transmission of values through learning, advice, and guidance. The second stage is value transaction, namely a two-way interaction process between teachers and students through dialogue, habituation, and behavioral correction. The third stage is transinternalization, namely the condition in which values become part of students' awareness and behavior. At this final stage, students practice religious values not merely because of obligation, but because of personal awareness (Harahap et al., 2024).

B. Character Education and the Moral Formation of Students

Character education is a conscious and planned process aimed at shaping students so that they possess moral knowledge, moral awareness, moral commitment, and moral action. In Thomas Lickona's thought, character education includes three main components: knowing the good, loving the good, and doing the good. Character education is not sufficient if it only teaches the difference between right and wrong. It must also build good habits so that students understand, feel, and are willing to do good (Zannatunnisya et al., 2024).

This framework shows that character education must address the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. The cognitive domain relates to students' ability to understand good values, social norms, and the consequences of actions. The affective domain relates to moral sensitivity, empathy, shame when doing wrong, and the motivation to do good. The behavioral domain relates to concrete practices, such as discipline, honesty, responsibility, care, politeness, and the ability to cooperate. If one of these domains is neglected, character education tends to become a formality.

In the school context, character education can be implemented through intracurricular, co-curricular, extracurricular, and school culture-based activities. Intracurricular learning shapes character through materials, methods, and learning interactions. Co-curricular and extracurricular activities provide space for practicing values through social activities, organizations, leadership, and service. Meanwhile, school culture shapes character through collective habits that occur every day. Religious culture occupies an important position here because it becomes a medium for habituating values repeatedly and contextually (Abdi, 2021).

Character education also requires role modeling. Students do not only learn from verbal instructions, but also from the behavior of teachers, principals, and their social environment. When teachers arrive on time, speak politely, act fairly, and demonstrate care, students receive concrete examples of character values. Conversely, inconsistency between educators' advice and behavior can weaken the internalization process. Therefore, the success of character education is strongly influenced by the integrity of school actors.

C. Religious Culture as a Strategy for Strengthening Character Education

Religious culture can serve as a strategy for strengthening character education because religious values have strong normative and emotional power in shaping behavior. Religious values do not only provide guidance regarding the relationship between humans and God, but also regulate relationships among humans, with the environment, and with the nation. This is consistent with the dimension of the Pancasila Student Profile, which views noble character broadly, including religious, personal, social, ecological, and civic morality (Suryanti, 2018).

As a character education strategy, religious culture works through three main mechanisms. First, habituation, namely character formation through the repetition of good behavior. Activities such as collective prayer, congregational prayer, recitation of holy texts, maintaining cleanliness, queuing, and greeting others can serve as means for developing discipline, responsibility, and politeness. Second, modeling, namely the exemplary behavior of teachers and school members in practicing religious values. Third, institutional reinforcement, namely strengthening through rules, schedules, rewards, evaluation, and cooperation with parents.

Religious culture needs to be implemented reflectively so that it does not turn into mere formal ritualism. If students only participate in activities because they fear punishment, then value internalization has not occurred deeply. Therefore, every religious activity needs to be accompanied by an explanation of meaning, moral dialogue, and connections to everyday life. For example, congregational prayer should not only be positioned as a ritual obligation, but also as a practice of time discipline, togetherness, and orderliness. Charity should not only be understood as the act of giving money, but also as a practice of empathy, solidarity, and social care. Thus, religious culture has a strategic contribution to strengthening character education when it is implemented systematically, consistently, and participatively. Schools need to ensure that religious culture does not merely become a ceremonial program, but becomes part of an institutional climate that shapes students' ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Manshuruddin et al., 2019).

Research Methodology

Religious culture can serve as a strategy for strengthening character education because religious values have strong normative and emotional power in shaping behavior. Religious values do not only provide guidance regarding the relationship between humans and God, but also regulate relationships among humans, with the environment, and with the nation. This is consistent with the dimension of the Pancasila Student Profile, which views noble character broadly, including religious, personal, social, ecological, and civic morality (Moeleong, 2006).

The data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through observations of school activities and interviews with informants. Secondary data were obtained from school documents, schedules of religious activities, school regulations, character development programs, activity photographs, and other supporting archives. Data collection techniques included limited participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation studies. Data analysis used an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation and technique triangulation. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview results, observations, and documentation so that the findings obtained had an adequate level of credibility (Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, 2014).

Results

Forms of Religious Culture Internalization at SMP Negeri 1 Beringin

The findings show that the internalization of religious culture at SMP Negeri 1 Beringin is implemented through daily habituation, weekly activities, incidental activities, and the integration of values into learning. Daily habituation appears in praying before and after learning, practicing greetings and polite interaction, emphasizing courteous language, and

strengthening time discipline. These activities are carried out repeatedly so that students become accustomed to connecting learning activities with religious and moral values.

In addition to daily habituation, the school also conducts scheduled religious activities, such as reciting holy verses, congregational prayer for Muslim students, spiritual guidance, and the commemoration of religious holidays. These activities do not only function as spiritual activities, but also become spaces for developing togetherness, care, and responsibility. Students are involved in committees, venue preparation, line arrangement, and activity implementation. This involvement strengthens the character of mutual cooperation and leadership.

Internalization also occurs through teacher role modeling. Teachers do not only provide instructions about good behavior, but also demonstrate examples through discipline, speech patterns, concern for students, and consistency in enforcing rules. During the observation process, teacher role modeling appeared to be an important factor because students more easily accepted values when those values were visible in concrete behavior. This is consistent with the principle of character education that students learn not only from teaching materials, but also from the social culture they experience every day (Harmita et al., 2022).

Another finding shows that religious culture is not limited to Religious Education subjects, but has also begun to be integrated into other subjects. Teachers connect learning materials with the values of honesty, responsibility, hard work, and care. For example, in group assignments, teachers emphasize the importance of cooperation and academic honesty. In classroom cleaning activities, teachers connect cleanliness with moral responsibility toward the environment. Thus, religious culture moves from the ritual sphere toward the broader formation of social character.

The Impact of Religious Culture on Strengthening Students’ Character

The internalization of religious culture contributes to strengthening students’ character, especially in the aspects of discipline, responsibility, honesty, politeness, and social care. Discipline is reflected in students’ increasing awareness of arriving on time, participating in morning activities, and obeying school rules. Although not all students demonstrate the same level of consistency, religious habituation provides a behavioral framework that helps teachers guide students.

The character of responsibility emerges through students’ involvement in religious activities and environmental cleanliness programs at school. Students assigned as activity officers, equipment organizers, or class coordinators demonstrate the ability to carry out responsibilities in a more structured manner. This responsibility is not only individual but also collective because students learn that the success of school activities depends on cooperation.

Honesty is an important aspect strengthened through religious habituation and moral supervision. Teachers instill the understanding that honesty is not merely a school rule, but also a religious and human value. In the learning context, the value of honesty is linked to the prohibition of cheating, the obligation to complete assignments independently, and the courage to admit mistakes. Thus, religious culture functions as an ethical foundation in shaping academic integrity (Widya, 2019).

Students’ politeness is also strengthened through the culture of greeting, friendly interaction, and respect for teachers. Students are habituated to use polite language, respect differences, and maintain good relationships with school members. In the aspect of social care, charity activities, social visits, and community service become media for learning empathy. Students learn that religiosity is not only related to personal worship, but also to concern for others. The following table summarizes the forms of religious culture, the character values strengthened, and the behavioral indicators that emerge.

No	Forms of Religious	Character Values	Behavioral Indicators of
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	Culture	Strengthened	Students
1	Prayer before and after learning	Religiosity, discipline	Students participate in opening and closing learning activities in an orderly manner
2	Greetings, friendly interaction, and polite language	Politeness, respect	Students become accustomed to greeting teachers and peers properly
3	Congregational prayer and spiritual guidance	Responsibility, discipline	Students participate in religious activities according to the schedule
4	Charity and social activities	Social care, empathy	Students participate in sharing activities
5	Integration of religious values into learning	Honesty, hard work	Students are guided to avoid cheating and complete assignments independently
6	Teacher role modeling	Integrity, responsibility	Students imitate teachers' patterns of discipline and politeness

The table shows that religious culture has a multidimensional function. First, religious culture shapes spiritual character through worship and prayer activities. Second, religious culture shapes social character through sharing activities, greetings, and cooperation. Third, religious culture shapes academic character through the strengthening of honesty, responsibility, and hard work. Thus, religious culture in schools cannot be reduced to formal religious activities only. It must be understood as an instrument for the comprehensive formation of students' character.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Internalization of Religious Culture

The success of religious culture internalization at SMP Negeri 1 Beringin is supported by several factors.

- a) First, there is the principal's commitment to building a religious and character-based school culture. This commitment is reflected in support for habituation programs, the arrangement of activity schedules, and coordination with teachers. The principal acts as an internal policy director so that religious culture does not operate sporadically.
- b) Second, teacher involvement is a key factor. Teachers act as educators, mentors, supervisors, and role models. The internalization of religious values becomes more effective when teachers consistently provide guidance and demonstrate behavior that aligns with the values being taught.
- c) Third, student participation also serves as a supporting factor. Students who are active in school organizations, religious activities, and social activities can become positive agents among their peers.
- d) Fourth, parental support also influences the success of internalization. Values habituated at school will become stronger if they receive reinforcement at home. Conversely, when there is a difference between school and family guidance patterns, students may experience value inconsistency. Therefore, communication between the school and parents becomes an important aspect in maintaining the continuity of character education.

This study also found several inhibiting factors. The first obstacle is the difference in students' levels of awareness. Not all students participate in religious activities with internal motivation. Some still participate because of obligation or teacher supervision. This condition indicates that the internalization process has not fully reached the stage of personal awareness. The second obstacle is limited time due to the density of academic activities. Teachers need to balance curriculum targets and character development.

The third obstacle is the influence of the environment outside school, especially social media and peer relationships. Students may receive different values from their digital and social environments. This becomes a challenge for schools because character education does not take place in an isolated space. Schools need to develop a more dialogical approach so that students can understand the moral reasons behind every religious activity, rather than merely carrying out routines (Yoga Purandina & Astra Winaya, 2020).

This discussion confirms that the internalization of religious culture requires a systemic approach. Schools need to manage religious culture through planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up. Religious activities need to be accompanied by value reflection so that students understand the moral meaning of each activity. Teachers also need to use a persuasive approach, not only an instructional one, so that students can develop deeper character awareness.

Conclusion

This study shows that the internalization of religious culture at SMP Negeri 1 Beringin Deli Serdang has a strategic role in strengthening students' character education. Based on the discussion, three main conclusions can be drawn.

- a) Religious culture is internalized through daily habituation, religious activities, teacher role modeling, and the integration of values into learning.
- b) The internalization of religious culture contributes to strengthening students' religious character, discipline, responsibility, honesty, politeness, and social care.
- c) The success of the program is influenced by the principal's commitment, teacher consistency, student participation, and parental support, while the obstacles include differences in students' awareness, limited time, and the influence of the external environment.

Religious culture needs to be managed systematically, reflectively, and sustainably so that it does not remain a routine, but becomes a foundation for shaping students' character.

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