

Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Strategies in Shaping Students' Religious Character at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai

Anna Syafrida, Muhammad Yunan Harahap, Charles Rangkuti

Abstract

This study examines the implementation of a humanistic approach in Islamic Religious Education learning to develop students' religious character through habituation strategies, exemplary behavior, and a humanistic personal approach. The objectives of this study are to: (1) describe the forms of implementing the principles of the humanistic approach in Islamic Religious Education learning, (2) analyze the impact of implementing the humanistic approach on the development of students' religious character, (3) describe an effective model for implementing the humanistic approach, and (4) identify the supporting and inhibiting factors in its implementation. The research method used was qualitative with an evaluative approach. The study was conducted at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai, involving the principal and Islamic Religious Education teachers as research subjects. Data collection techniques included participatory observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Data analysis referred to the Miles and Huberman model (data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification), while data validity was tested through source and method triangulation. The findings revealed that Islamic Religious Education teachers implemented three main strategies: habituation of daily ritual worship activities (Duha prayer, congregational Zuhur prayer, and Qur'an recitation), consistent exemplary behavior, and a humanistic personal approach. As a result, the level of attendance in congregational prayers increased, and there was a significant decrease in cases of disciplinary violations. The study concludes that a multidimensional strategy integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects has proven effective in shaping students' religious character. The implications of this study recommend providing broader opportunities for Islamic Religious Education teachers to develop innovative strategies without being burdened by overly dense curriculum targets, as well as strengthening collaboration between schools and parents through sustainable two-way communication.

Keywords: *Teacher Strategies, Religious Character, Humanistic Approach*

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Introduction

Indonesia's national education is currently facing major challenges in shaping the younger generation to become not only intellectually intelligent but also possess strong religious character. Moral degradation, student brawls, misuse of social media, and declining respect for teachers and parents have become alarming phenomena in various educational institutions. According to Rangkuti et al., (2024:202) "education has a very important role in developing human potential, both intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually." Furthermore, Lickona (2012:45) reminds us that "Character education is the deliberate effort to cultivate virtue, and virtues are objectively good human qualities that are widely recognized across cultures." This statement emphasizes that character building is not a spontaneous process, but rather a conscious and systematic effort. Therefore, the strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education teachers are the key to the successful development of students' religious character in schools.

Amid the currents of globalization and digitalization, religious values are often marginalized by the cultures of hedonism and individualism. Schools, as formal educational institutions, have a moral responsibility to integrate religious values into every learning activity. As emphasized by Harahap et al., (2025:218), "Character education is an important element in producing a young generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also has good morals and noble character." Likewise, Munardji (2020:67) states, "Religious character education is not sufficient if it is only taught theoretically, but it must be internalized through exemplary behavior, habituation, and a conducive school culture." This perspective highlights that teachers, particularly Islamic Religious Education teachers, must be able to serve as living role models for their students. Without appropriate strategies, religious instruction will merely become memorization that leaves no lasting impact on students' daily behavior. Therefore, it is important to examine in depth how Islamic Religious Education teachers design, implement, and evaluate the process of developing religious character.

SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai is one of the integrated Islamic schools that places religious character as the main core value within its educational system. The school not only focuses on academic achievement but also on shaping students' Islamic personality through various programs such as Duha prayer, Qur'an recitation, and religious social activities. Furthermore, Fathurrohman (2019:112) explains that "integrated Islamic schools have the advantage of simultaneously integrating the national curriculum with the religious curriculum, enabling the character-building process to take place holistically." This integration requires Islamic Religious Education teachers to possess strong pedagogical and professional competencies. However, the reality in the field often shows a gap between the ideal targets and the actual implementation of character-building strategies.

In this context, Islamic religious education plays a central role because it is directly tasked with instilling divine values and noble morals in students. Many teachers remain trapped in monotonous lecture methods, causing students to quickly become bored and less motivated. Furthermore, Helmawati (2021:88) asserts that "Islamic religious education teachers who rely solely on a cognitive approach without touching the affective and psychomotor aspects will fail to form a religious character that is embedded in students." Yet, religious character requires a process of habituation, emotional practice, and value reinforcement through real activities. Therefore, learning strategies based on experience, role modeling, and habituation have become an urgent necessity. SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai, with its integrated Islamic background, has great potential to develop these innovative strategies.

Furthermore, external challenges such as the influence of negative social interactions, unlimited access to negative content on the internet, and a lack of parental supervision complicate efforts to build religious character. Islamic religious education teachers cannot work alone; they must collaborate with homeroom teachers, parents, and the community. Meanwhile, Nata (2020:134) states that "the success of character education in schools is largely determined by the synergy between teachers, principals, school committees, and parents in consistently

applying values both at school and at home." Without solid cooperation, the religious character built at school can collapse once students are outside the school environment. This condition demands a holistic strategy involving all stakeholders. SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai, as a school with a relatively homogeneous religious community, has a great opportunity to realize such synergy.

Studies on Islamic religious education teachers' strategies in forming religious character are still relatively limited, particularly those conducted at the integrated Islamic junior high school level. As Rahmawati (2022:56) notes, "not many studies have micro-level explored the specific techniques used by Islamic religious education teachers in dealing with cases of violations of religious values by students." Yet, understanding effective strategies is essential for replicating success in other schools. Therefore, this research comes to fill that gap by taking SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai as the locus. This study focuses on the strategies of Islamic religious education teachers both inside and outside the classroom.

Given the background above, this study aims to describe in depth the strategies applied by Islamic religious education teachers at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai in shaping students' religious character. The scope of the study includes strategy planning, implementation of learning methods, routine habituation, teacher role modeling, and evaluation of character formation success. As Sholeh (2021:201) adds, "successful religious character is marked by students' internal awareness to perform worship, behave honestly, act disciplined, and possess high social empathy." This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study method, enabling it to capture phenomena naturalistically and contextually. It is hoped that the findings of this research will provide a theoretical contribution to the development of Islamic religious education and practical contributions for Islamic religious education teachers and school principals.

Literature Review

A. Concepts and Dimensions of Students' Religious Character

Religious character is the primary foundation in shaping the personality of a true Muslim who is not only obedient in performing ritual worship but also possesses noble morals in daily life. According to Anwar (2021:33), "religious character is an attitude and behavior of obedience in practicing one's religious teachings, being tolerant toward the worship practices of other religions, and living harmoniously with followers of other faiths." This definition emphasizes that religious character is neither exclusive nor coercive in imposing beliefs, but rather promotes social harmony and tolerance. At SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai, the understanding of religious character is broadened to include obedience in worship, honesty, discipline, responsibility, and concern for others. Islamic Religious Education teachers believe that without strong religious character, students will be easily influenced by negative cultures from their social environment and social media.

The dimensions of religious character developed in this school are based on the universal values of Islam derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah. Bahri (2019:78) explains that "the dimensions of religious character at least include five main aspects, namely belief in Allah SWT, the practice of obligatory and sunnah worship, moral conduct toward fellow human beings, moral conduct toward the environment, and honesty in speech and actions." These five dimensions are integrated into every Islamic Religious Education learning activity as well as daily religious programs. For example, belief in Allah is nurtured through collective prayers before and after learning activities; ritual worship is habituated through Duha prayer and congregational Zuhur prayer; and moral conduct toward others is practiced through charity activities for orphans and community service in maintaining the cleanliness of the school environment. Islamic Religious Education teachers consistently remind students that religious character is not something instant, but rather the result of a long process of habituation and exemplary conduct.

Furthermore, Fadhillah (2022:54) states that “religious character measured solely from ritual aspects will produce individuals who are pious personally, but not necessarily socially righteous.” This statement is highly relevant to the context of SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai, where Islamic Religious Education teachers emphasize the balance between *habluminallah* (the vertical relationship with God) and *habluminannas* (the horizontal relationship with fellow human beings). Students are guided to understand that sincere prayer should encourage honest behavior, refraining from stealing, and avoiding inappropriate language. Likewise, the voluntary Monday-Thursday fasting encouraged in this school is expected to train patience, self-control, and empathy toward those who are hungry. Such a holistic approach makes religious character not merely a theological burden, but rather a meaningful and enjoyable way of life.

The implementation of the concept of religious character at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai also takes into account the psychological developmental stage of junior high school students who are in the transitional period between childhood and adolescence. At this age, students begin to question authority, tend to resist rigid rules, yet greatly need inspirational role models. In every learning activity, teachers provide space for discussion about why worship is important and how religious values can be applied in modern life full of challenges. As a result, students obey not merely out of fear of punishment, but because of internal awareness (self-awareness) that religious values bring goodness to themselves and others.

In addition to the internal aspect, the external dimension of religious character is also manifested in students’ social behavior within the school environment. Islamic Religious Education teachers systematically develop observable behavioral indicators such as: greeting others when entering the classroom, apologizing when making mistakes, helping friends who are facing difficulties, not discriminating against peers based on economic status, and maintaining environmental cleanliness as part of faith. Meanwhile, Hidayat (2020:99) emphasizes that “authentic religious character will be visible in students’ daily lives, not only when teachers are supervising or when they are within the school environment.” At SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai, Islamic Religious Education teachers frequently conduct spontaneous observations in the cafeteria, schoolyard, and places of worship to naturally assess whether students have internalized the values being taught.

B. Islamic Religious Education Teachers’ Strategies in Internalizing Religious Values

According to Karim (2021:112), “the internalization of religious values is the process of instilling religious values into students’ personalities so that these values become integrated into their awareness, attitudes, and daily behavior.” This process cannot occur instantly or merely through one-way lectures. Islamic Religious Education teachers at this school begin by designing Lesson Plans (RPP) that integrate religious character values into every basic competency. For example, when teaching the topic of honesty, teachers do not only explain its definition and supporting religious arguments, but also invite students to engage in simulations about the consequences of dishonesty in various life situations. Such integration makes religious lessons feel relevant and applicable.

One of the main strategies employed is the habit formation method through scheduled and structured daily religious activities. Every morning before classes begin, all students perform congregational Duha prayer and recite the Qur’an for 15 minutes. Then, at Zuhr time, they perform congregational Zuhr prayer in the school mosque, which is located very close to the classrooms. In line with this, Lubis (2020:67) states that “the habituation of ritual worship in the school environment through congregational practice has a strong psychological effect because it creates emotional bonds among students while also fostering a sense of togetherness in obeying Allah’s commands.” Islamic Religious Education teachers serve as imams, preachers, or mentors in every activity, allowing them to directly monitor students’ attendance, concentration, and participation.

In addition to habituation, the strategy of exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*) occupies the most central position in shaping religious character at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai. Islamic Religious Education teachers realize that junior high school students are highly sensitive to inconsistencies between teachers' words and actions. Therefore, all Islamic Religious Education teachers are required to demonstrate noble character in front of students: arriving on time, dressing neatly and modestly according to Islamic teachings, speaking gently yet firmly, refraining from smoking within the school environment, and always greeting others with *salam* when meeting them. Meanwhile, Masyhur (2022:88) emphasizes that "teachers who are honest, trustworthy, and steadfast will find it easier to shape students' religious character compared to teachers who are merely skilled in theory but lack exemplary conduct." In fact, without uttering a single word, a teacher with good behavior has already taught the values of honesty, patience, and sincerity.

Another strategy is the personal or individual approach, which is specifically provided for students who experience difficulties in internalizing religious values. Each Islamic Religious Education teacher has a mentoring list of 5–10 students whose character development is intensively monitored. This approach is carried out through dialogue during break times, home visits, or communication with parents through messaging applications. In this personal approach, teachers do not immediately punish students when they commit violations, but instead attempt to understand the background of the problem. Nasution (2019:45) explains that "the personal approach in religious character education is effective in touching students' affective and spiritual aspects because they feel cared for, valued, and not judged." As a result, students who were previously mischievous or reluctant to worship gradually become more disciplined and responsible after receiving intensive guidance.

Islamic Religious Education teachers also use reinforcement strategies in the form of educational rewards and punishments. Rewards are given in the form of praise in front of the class, good behavior points that can be exchanged for simple gifts, or opportunities to become prayer leaders or Friday sermon speakers. Meanwhile, punishments are educational in nature, such as memorizing prayers or short surahs, cleaning the mosque area, or writing reflective essays on the importance of honesty. Collaborative strategies involving parents and the community also serve as important complements. Islamic Religious Education teachers regularly hold parent meetings at the beginning of each semester to establish a shared understanding of the religious values that should be implemented at home.

C. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Formation of Religious Character

The success of Islamic Religious Education teachers' strategies in shaping religious character cannot be separated from various supporting factors that strengthen the process of internalizing religious values. The first supporting factor is the strong commitment of the principal and the entire school management toward religious character-building programs. School policies that require daily religious activities and allocate specific time for character development demonstrate that religious character is not merely a slogan, but a top priority. As explained by Siregar (2021:56), "visionary and consistent leadership in implementing religious values in schools will create a deeply rooted religious culture that is followed by all members of the school community without exception." Financial support and adequate facilities, such as a representative mosque, Islamic counseling rooms, and complete worship equipment, also serve as significant supporting factors.

The second supporting factor is the socio-religious background of students' parents, the majority of whom understand the importance of religious character education. Furthermore, Harahap (2020:92) states that "the active involvement of parents in supporting religious programs at school, such as reminding children to perform congregational prayers and recite the Qur'an at home, creates a dual impact: children receive reinforcement from two directions simultaneously." At this school, parents often

volunteer in activities such as Islamic boarding school programs during Ramadan, celebrations of Islamic holidays, and social service activities. The harmonious relationship between school and family creates a conducive ecological environment for the formation of religious character. When children see that their teachers and parents are aligned in instilling religious values, they will not feel confused or seek justification for violating rules.

The third supporting factor is the strong pedagogical, professional, and personal competence of Islamic Religious Education teachers. Hasibuan (2022:74) emphasizes that “Islamic Religious Education teachers who continuously improve their competencies will be more creative and innovative in designing learning strategies that are engaging and capable of addressing contemporary challenges such as the influence of social media and promiscuity.” Teachers at this school also possess personal qualities such as patience, compassion, and humility, making them easily accepted and respected by students. The combination of good teaching abilities and high personal integrity makes them true role models. Students not only learn about religion, but also learn how to become Muslims with noble character through their teachers’ daily behavior. This exemplary conduct is the strongest supporting factor that cannot be replaced by even the most advanced technology.

However, various inhibiting factors also affect the process of forming religious character in this school. The main inhibiting factor is the negative influence of the social environment outside school, especially peer groups that do not have strong religious backgrounds. Many students behave well and remain disciplined at school, but after returning home and meeting friends in their neighborhood, they often imitate behaviors that contradict religious values, such as speaking harshly, littering, or even skipping religious activities. Dalimunthe (2019:108) explains that “peer pressure during adolescence is very strong, so the values instilled at school can quickly erode if there is no supervision and reinforcement from parents at home.” Islamic Religious Education teachers address this obstacle by strengthening group counseling programs and establishing Islamic student communities within the school as alternative spaces for positive social interaction.

The second inhibiting factor is the widespread availability of negative content on social media and the internet, which students can easily access through their personal devices. Content such as cyberbullying, pornography, hate speech, and dangerous online challenges often attract teenagers more than religious content, which is often perceived as serious and monotonous. Syahputra (2021:145) states that “gadgets and the internet are double-edged swords: on one hand, they facilitate access to religious information, but on the other hand, they open the door widely to destructive content that damages students’ religious character if not accompanied by adequate digital literacy.” Islamic Religious Education teachers respond to this challenge by integrating digital literacy education into Islamic Religious Education learning activities.

The third inhibiting factor is the limitation of time and the heavy curriculum load, which often makes Islamic Religious Education teachers feel rushed to complete academic material targets. Although the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum formally provide opportunities for character strengthening, the reality in the field shows that teachers spend more time teaching material that will be tested in assessments and examinations. Zen (2020:67) emphasizes that “the paradox of character education in Indonesia is that an evaluation system still oriented toward cognitive achievement makes teachers reluctant to allocate time for habituation and value internalization because they worry that not all academic material will be covered.” Islamic Religious Education teachers overcome this obstacle by integrating character reinforcement into every learning session without adding extra instructional hours.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach aimed at understanding in depth, holistically, and contextually the strategies implemented by Islamic Religious Education teachers in shaping the religious character of students at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai. According to Sugiyono (2020:15), “qualitative research is a research method based on the philosophy of postpositivism, used to examine natural object conditions, where the researcher serves as the key instrument, data collection techniques are carried out through triangulation (combination), data analysis is inductive/qualitative in nature, and the research findings emphasize meaning rather than generalization.” The subjects of this study were Islamic Religious Education teachers who taught grades VII, VIII, and IX at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai, as well as the principal who was directly involved in the religious character-building program. The data sources in this study were divided into two categories: primary data sources in the form of in-depth interview results, and secondary data sources obtained from supporting documents such as Lesson Plans, records of disciplinary violations, and reports on school religious activities. The data collection techniques used included: (1) participatory observation, in which the researcher was actively involved in learning and religious activities; (2) semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to explore information flexibly while still referring to indicators of religious character and the strategies for its formation; and (3) documentation, namely collecting photographs, videos, archives, and relevant field notes. The data analysis technique applied was the Miles and Huberman (2019) model, which consists of three simultaneous stages: data reduction, namely selecting and summarizing data; data display in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, or thematic charts; and conclusion drawing/verification conducted continuously throughout the research process. To ensure data validity, this study employed source triangulation (comparing information from teachers, students, and documents) and technique triangulation (comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation).

Results

Based on the research conducted at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai, it was found that Islamic Religious Education teachers carry out their roles not merely as instructors of religious subjects, but more importantly as spiritual mentors who actively shape students’ religious character through various integrated approaches. From in-depth interviews with three Islamic Religious Education teachers teaching grades VII, VIII, and IX, it was revealed that they consciously design different strategies according to the psychological maturity level of the students. For grade VII students, who are still in the transition period from elementary school, teachers tend to use habituation approaches and direct role-modeling. Meanwhile, for grade VIII and IX students, who are entering a more critical stage of adolescence, teachers shift their strategies toward reflective dialogue and the provision of moral responsibility. These findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education teachers at this school do not work in a rigid or uniform manner, but are highly adaptive to the real conditions of the students they encounter daily.

The consistently implemented daily religious activities at this school became the most prominent finding as a strategy for developing religious character. Every morning before the school bell rings, all students gather in the school mosque to perform congregational Duha prayer followed by fifteen minutes of Qur’an recitation. In addition, during the first break period, Islamic Religious Education teachers take turns supervising the congregational Zuhr prayer and delivering short religious talks (kultum) on various moral themes. This success cannot be separated from the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers, who always arrive early and serve as imams in every prayer activity.

The strategy of exemplary conduct proved to be the most dominant factor influencing changes in students’ religious behavior at this school. From interviews with ten purposively selected students, almost all of them mentioned that they imitated the way Islamic Religious Education teachers spoke gently yet firmly, dressed neatly, and habitually greeted others with salam whenever entering or leaving a room. An eighth-grade student honestly admitted that he used to speak harshly to his friends, but after observing that his teacher never used inappropriate

words even when angry, he gradually tried to change this bad habit. The Islamic Religious Education teachers themselves confirmed that they intentionally restrained themselves from becoming emotional in front of the class because they were fully aware that dozens of students' eyes were constantly observing and imitating them.

In addition to these findings, the researcher also discovered that the personal approach routinely carried out by Islamic Religious Education teachers toward students with behavioral problems was effective in restoring their religious behavior. Islamic Religious Education teachers at this school have a special schedule every Friday afternoon to meet individually with students whose character records show signs of decline. During these personal meetings, which usually last around twenty minutes, teachers do not immediately judge or punish students, but instead invite them to have casual conversations while drinking tea in the school cafeteria. Through these conversations, teachers are generally able to identify the root causes that make students reluctant to worship or engage in deviant behavior. After understanding the causes, teachers then provide mutually agreed solutions, such as asking homeroom teachers to reduce assignments or communicating with parents to limit their children's gadget use at night.

Parental involvement in the religious character-building program also emerged as an important finding worth noting. The school regularly organizes parent-teacher meetings at the beginning and end of each semester, but more importantly, it uses an electronic communication book to monitor the development of students' religious character every week. In this communication book, Islamic Religious Education teachers record three aspects: attendance in congregational prayers, participation in Qur'an recitation activities, and special notes regarding students' social behavior. Parents are required to read and sign these records, then provide comments or follow-up actions at home. Islamic Religious Education teachers also receive feedback reports from parents regarding children's behavior at home, such as whether the child is willing to help parents, performs prayers willingly without being reminded, or instead argues back and neglects Qur'an recitation.

Conclusion

The strategies implemented by Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai have proven effective in shaping students' religious character in a holistic and sustainable manner. This effectiveness did not emerge by coincidence, but was systematically designed through three main pillars: habituation of daily ritual worship, consistent exemplary conduct from teachers, and a humanistic personal approach toward each student. Another important finding shows that the success of these strategies is strongly determined by the solid synergy between the school and parents, where two-way communication takes place regularly through electronic communication books and periodic meetings. Islamic Religious Education teachers at this school do not merely function as classroom instructors, but also as spiritual mentors who accompany students through critical moments of adolescent development. Thus, a multidimensional approach that integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects into an inseparable unity becomes the key factor in the successful formation of religious character. Furthermore, the study found that the greatest obstacles in the process of forming religious character originate from the negative influence of social environments outside school and exposure to destructive content on social media. Nevertheless, Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMP IT Aziziyah Binjai have been able to overcome these obstacles by strengthening group guidance programs based on Islamic values and integrating digital literacy education into every learning material. This demonstrates that the challenges of the digital era should not be addressed by prohibiting or avoiding technology, but rather by equipping students with the ability to filter and select beneficial content. Islamic Religious Education teachers also continuously and adaptively update their teaching methods to prevent monotony and to compete with the attractiveness of digital devices. This success indicates that religious character education in the modern era can, in fact, be strengthened through the wise use of technology,

provided that teachers possess strong pedagogical competence and exemplary personal character.

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