RELIGIOUS CULTURE LEARNING AND ISLAMIC CHARACTER FORMATION IN INTEGRATED ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

In a global educational context marked by rapid social change, digital transformation, and increasing concerns over moral and character formation, schools are challenged to balance academic excellence with the cultivation of ethical and religious values. This study examines how religious culture learning is planned, implemented, and evaluated in an Islamic junior secondary school, and assesses its contribution to shaping students' religious character. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with school leaders, teachers, students, and parents. The data were analyzed thematically to capture participants' lived experiences and institutional practices related to religious culture learning. The findings indicate that the school has systematically integrated religious culture into instructional planning, classroom practices, and evaluation processes. Active learning strategies, the use of diverse learning media, and consistent habituation practices were found to effectively support the development of students' religious character. Nevertheless, the study also identifies challenges arising from contemporary social dynamics and external influences that may affect character formation. The study concludes that religious culture learning, when supported by collaborative engagement with parents and the community, can function as a meaningful pedagogical strategy for character education. These findings imply that Islamic educational institutions need adaptive, context-sensitive models of religious culture learning to ensure continued relevance and effectiveness in fostering holistic student development.

INTRODUCTION

Education is globally recognized as a transformative process that shapes not only academic competence but also individual behavior, social relationships, and ethical engagement with society. In recent years, international scholarship has increasingly emphasized character education as a response to global challenges such as moral fragmentation, social polarization, and cultural change (Arystanbek et al., 2026). As schools operate within increasingly complex social environments, they are expected to cultivate learners who demonstrate moral awareness, responsibility, empathy, and integrity alongside cognitive achievement (Liando, 2019; Cheung et al., 2021; Juliadilla et al., 2025). Systematic reviews across diverse educational fields, from peace education to medical and community-based education, consistently highlight that character formation requires intentional, coherent, and context-sensitive educational practices rather than incidental moral instruction (Dymnicki et al., 2025; Silver et al., 2026).

Within Islamic education, character formation is deeply rooted in religious, moral, and social values that guide personal conduct and communal life. Recent studies on curriculum reform and Islamic social ethics emphasize that Islamic education is not merely concerned with the transmission of religious knowledge but also with nurturing ethical dispositions that align faith, behavior, and social responsibility (Adiyono & Sholeh, 2025; Alsuhaymi & Atallah, 2025). Religious culture in schools refers to the collective institutional effort to translate religious teachings into shared norms, routines, and practices that structure daily interactions and decision-making (Tajudin Noor, 2022; Kultsum et al., 2022). Through habituation, modeling, and institutional norms, religious culture serves as a pedagogical mechanism through which values are internalized as lived experiences rather than as abstract ideals (Soratana et al., 2021; Karim et al., 2023).

Islamic educational scholarship further emphasizes that religious-cultural values are grounded in the awareness of human beings as servants of Allah, thereby encouraging devotion, moral discipline, and ethical accountability in both the spiritual and social dimensions of life (Khobir et al., 2025; Hanafi et al., 2025). Such awareness plays a central role in shaping religious character, identity formation, and self-regulation (Sandholtz & Shea, 2012; Nurwapika, 2020). In this sense, character education seeks not only to prevent harmful behaviors but also to foster responsibility, self-control, and social harmony that enable learners to contribute positively to their communities (Lavy, 2020; Jeynes, 2019; Polat, 2023). Empirical studies in Islamic and general education contexts demonstrate that character development is most sustainable when values are embedded within school culture and reinforced through consistent practice and reflection (Ekawati et al., 2018; Rosadi, 2023).

Subsequently, previous studies have examined religious culture learning from multiple perspectives, including teacher roles, habituation practices, leadership, and exemplary behavior in schools (Lubis, 2022; Casta et al., 2021; Suhifatullah et al., 2021). Other research highlights the contribution of school culture and routine religious programs to character development in various educational settings (Febriani et al., 2020; Karim et al., 2020). However, much of this literature focuses primarily on outcomes or isolated practices, providing limited insight into how religious culture learning is systematically planned, enacted, and evaluated as an integrated educational framework. As a result, the institutional processes through which religious culture functions as a sustained character education strategy remain underexplored (Rinto et al., 2020). Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a process-oriented perspective to examine religious culture learning through the interconnected dimensions of planning, implementation, and evaluation. By analyzing how religious culture is intentionally designed, enacted through daily school practices, and continuously assessed, this study seeks to contribute to Islamic education scholarship by offering a more comprehensive understanding of religious culture learning as a whole-school pedagogical system.

METHOD

This study was guided by a phenomenological inquiry framework that emphasizes participants' lived experiences and contextual meanings in educational practice (Schoepfer & Rogers, 2014; Creswell et al., 2014). Analytically, religious culture learning was conceptualized as an integrated process encompassing planning, implementation, and evaluation, which function collectively to internalize religious values into students' character (Tajudin Noor, 2022; Sutarman et al., 2020; Trisnantari & Mutohar, 2022). This framework enabled a systematic examination of how religious culture is intentionally designed, enacted through everyday school practices, and assessed as a character education strategy within Islamic educational institutions.

Employing a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological design, the study was conducted at SMPIT Ibnu Khaldun, Cirebon Regency, an integrated Islamic junior

secondary school selected for its structured and strategic implementation of religious culture learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis to capture experiential, behavioral, and institutional dimensions of religious culture learning (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Atkins et al., 2016; Kraus et al., 2018). Primary data were obtained from school leaders, teachers, and students, while secondary data included curricular documents, schedules, and evaluation records (Jeong et al., 2017). Data were analyzed thematically through iterative stages of organization, coding, interpretation, and verification, with triangulation of sources and techniques, peer debriefing, and continuous validation applied to ensure credibility, consistency, and analytical rigor (Creswell et al., 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are organized according to three analytical dimensions: planning, implementation, and evaluation of religious culture learning in shaping students' religious character. These results are derived from the triangulation of data collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis, providing a comprehensive representation of institutional practices and participants' lived experiences.

Planning of Religious Culture Learning
Institutional Objectives of Religious Culture Learning

Interview data indicate that institutional objectives prioritize the formation of students' religious character through the internalization of Islamic values in daily school life. School leaders described the primary goal as cultivating consistent religious attitudes, such as discipline in worship, respect, honesty, and social responsibility, rather than limiting religious learning to cognitive understanding (principal, personal communication, January 2024). Teachers similarly emphasized that objectives are framed to align students' behavior with Islamic values across academic and non-academic activities (Islamic education teacher, personal communication, March 2024). These stated objectives were corroborated by school planning documents reviewed during data collection, which outline character formation as a core educational target, and by observations indicating that religious values were explicitly referenced during routine school activities.

Program Design and Activity Structuring

Findings from interviews and documents show that religious culture learning is structured through a combination of daily, weekly, and periodic programs. Daily activities include routine religious practices embedded into the school schedule, while weekly and periodic programs are designed to reinforce and extend these practices. Participants reported that program design includes clear scheduling, sequencing of activities across the school day, and the distribution of student roles, such as leading prayers or Qur'anic recitation (vice principal for student affairs, personal communication, February 2024). Observational data confirmed the regularity of these schedules and the rotation of student responsibilities, while program schedules and activity guidelines obtained from school documents provided written evidence of systematic planning.

Curriculum and Learning Resource Planning

From the thorough examination of curriculum planning, it is found that religious values are intentionally integrated into both curricular and co-curricular activities. Teachers reported that lesson plans incorporate religious values relevant to subject content and student development stages, enabling connections between academic learning and religious character formation (class teacher, personal communication, April 2024). Moreover, document analysis of lesson plans and curricular outlines supports these claims, showing explicit references to religious values and character objectives. In addition, participants noted the planned use of

diverse learning resources, including textbooks, audio-visual materials, and school-prepared resources, to support religious culture learning (teacher, personal communication, May 2024). Meanwhile, Observations of classroom and school activities further corroborated the use of these materials during learning sessions.

Planning for Student Participation and Support

The data also show planned strategies to promote inclusive student participation and support students with varying levels of religious knowledge. Particularly important, the interviewed teachers described supervision systems, guidance methods, and follow-up procedures aimed at helping students who face challenges in engaging with religious activities. (teacher, personal communication, June 2024). These strategies included closer monitoring, additional guidance, and adaptive arrangements to encourage participation without exclusion. Furthermore, the observational data confirmed the presence of teacher supervision during religious activities, while school documents outlined procedures for monitoring participation and addressing student needs. Together, these data sources demonstrate that planning for religious culture learning includes not only program design but also structured support systems aimed at sustaining student engagement across varying levels of religious readiness.

Implementation of Religious Culture Learning
Daily Religious Habituation Practices

The obtained interview data indicate that daily religious habituation practices form the core of religious culture learning implementation. Teachers and school leaders reported that routine activities include Islamic greetings (5S), prayers before and after lessons, congregational Dhuha prayer, Qur'anic tadarus, Asmaul Husna recitation, and Qur'anic literacy activities (teacher, personal communication, February 2024; principal, personal communication, March 2024). Observational data also galvanized that these activities were conducted consistently at scheduled times and involved the majority of students. School schedules and activity guidelines reviewed during document analysis further corroborated the regularity and institutionalization of these practices. Additionally, students reported that participation in daily activities had become habitual, as they were carried out collectively and integrated into the school timetable (student, personal communication, April 2024).

Periodic and Program-Based Religious Activities

In addition to daily routines, findings show that religious culture learning is implemented through weekly and periodic programs. Interviewed participants identified activities such as tahfidz sessions, khitobah, and infaq as structured programs conducted regularly, though not daily (vice principal for student affairs, personal communication, January 2024). Document analysis of program schedules confirmed the designated frequency and duration of these activities. Furthermore, observations indicated that students were assigned specific roles, such as leading recitations, delivering speeches, or managing infaq collections, on a rotating basis. Students described these responsibilities as opportunities to practice religious values and social accountability in real contexts (student, personal communication, May 2024).

Teacher Roles and Modeling in Implementation

The implementation of religious culture learning was strongly supported by teachers' active roles as supervisors and role models. Teachers reported that consistently monitoring student participation and providing guidance during religious activities will result in students demonstrating expected behaviors through personal example (teacher, personal communication, March 2024). Later, observational data confirmed these reports by showing teachers participating in religious activities, giving reminders, and demonstrating proper behavior. Documents like teacher duty schedules also reinforced the organized structure of teacher participation. Student interviews revealed that teachers' consistent presence and

behavior influenced students' adherence to religious practices and norms (student, personal communication, June 2024).

Student Engagement and Behavioral Responses

Triangulated data indicate high levels of student engagement in the implementation of religious culture learning. Specifically, observations showed active participation in congregational prayers, Qur'anic activities, and program-based religious events, with minimal external prompting. Furthermore, interview data suggest that students increasingly demonstrated independence and responsibility in fulfilling worship practices, including preparing prayer materials and participating in activities without direct instruction. Additionally, teachers reported noticeable changes in students' consistency and self-regulation over time. These findings, supported by observation records and participation logs, illustrate how religious culture learning is enacted as a lived practice that, over time, gradually fosters students' autonomous engagement with religious activities.

Evaluation of Religious Culture Learning
Teacher Perceptions of Student Character Development

Interview data reveal that teachers perceived notable improvements in students' religious character following the implementation of religious culture learning. Teachers consistently reported increased discipline in worship practices, greater respect toward peers and teachers, and heightened awareness of ethical behavior in daily interactions (teacher, personal communication, February 2024; Islamic education teacher, personal communication, April 2024). These perceptions were supported by teachers' reflective notes and evaluation records, which were reviewed during document analysis and highlighted progress in students' consistency and responsibility. Observational data further corroborated these accounts, showing more orderly participation in congregational prayers and improved adherence to school routines over time.

Student Reflections on Religious Culture Learning

From the results of student interviews, it is clear that learners viewed religious culture learning as relevant to their everyday lives beyond the school context. Students reported that religious practices learned at school influenced their behavior at home and in social settings, particularly in relation to prayer discipline and respectful conduct (student, personal communication, March 2024; student, personal communication, May 2024). These reflections were consistent across interviews and supported by observational evidence showing students independently initiating religious practices. Documents related to student reflection logs and activity reports further confirmed that students were encouraged to connect school-based religious learning with daily life experiences.

Observational Evidence of Behavioral Change

Non-participant observations provided direct evidence of behavioral changes associated with religious culture learning. Observers recorded consistent student participation in daily and periodic religious activities, including congregational prayers and Qur'anic recitation, with reduced need for teacher reminders. Students were also observed adhering more consistently to school norms, such as punctuality, orderly conduct, and respectful communication. These observational findings aligned with interview data from both teachers and students, as well as with attendance records and participation logs examined during document analysis, reinforcing the credibility of reported behavioral changes.

Internal and External Factors Influencing Effectiveness

Evaluation findings also identified internal and external factors that influenced the effectiveness of religious culture learning. Interview and document data indicate that enabling conditions included a supportive school environment, committed teachers, and active parental

involvement in reinforcing religious practices at home (vice principal, personal communication, January 2024; parent, personal communication, June 2024). Conversely, participants identified constraints such as limited facilities, time constraints within the school schedule, uneven student religious backgrounds, and exposure to digital content that conflicted with religious values (teacher, personal communication, May 2024). Observational data supported these accounts by noting variations in participation during resource-intensive activities and challenges in maintaining consistency during periods of high academic demand. Together, these triangulated findings illustrate how contextual factors shape the perceived effectiveness and sustainability of religious culture learning.

This study examined religious culture learning as an institutional strategy for shaping students' religious character through an integrated framework of planning, implementation, and evaluation. The findings indicate that religious character formation is most effective when religious culture is systematically designed, consistently enacted through daily school life, and continuously evaluated using multiple sources of evidence. This supports the view that character education is not merely an instructional outcome but the result of coherent institutional culture, leadership, and management practices (Tajudin Noor, 2022; Sutarman et al., 2020; Trisnantari & Mutohar, 2022).

From a planning perspective, the findings demonstrate that clearly articulated institutional objectives and structured program design play a decisive role in translating Islamic values into lived educational practices. The alignment between school vision, curriculum integration, and religious culture programs reflects what Aalde and Staal Jenset (2023) conceptualize as program coherence, in which consistency between goals, activities, and outcomes enhances educational effectiveness. Such coherence ensures that religious values are embedded not merely as symbolic expressions but as guiding principles that shape daily behavior and institutional decision-making.

The integration of religious values into curricular planning further supports prior research emphasizing that character education becomes more effective when values are embedded across learning domains rather than confined to religious subjects alone (Adiyono & Sholeh, 2025; Kultsum et al., 2022). This finding aligns with broader Islamic education scholarship, which highlights curriculum reform as a critical pathway for internalizing social, ethical, and spiritual values in contemporary educational contexts (Khobir et al., 2025; Juwaini et al., 2025). As such, religious culture learning operates as a curricular ecology rather than an isolated instructional component.

In terms of implementation, the findings reveal that religious culture learning is enacted primarily through structured habituation practices supported by consistent teacher modeling. Daily and periodic activities, such as congregational prayers, Qur'anic literacy, and ethical social interactions, function as repeated moral rehearsals that gradually shape students' dispositions. This supports studies emphasizing the central role of habituation in character formation, particularly when reinforced through meaningful routines and social interaction (Soratana et al., 2021; Lavy, 2020).

However, the results also underscore that habituation alone is insufficient without strong exemplification from educators. Teachers' roles as moral agents and role models were central to sustaining students' engagement and internalization of values, confirming findings from leadership and spiritual education studies that emphasize the relational and ethical influence of educators in religious institutions (Karim et al., 2022; Rosadi, 2023). This relational dimension resonates with classical Islamic educational thought, which positions moral modeling as foundational to ethical learning (Huda et al., 2024).

Student engagement findings suggest a gradual transition from externally guided participation toward greater independence and responsibility in religious practices. This

progression reflects the developmental internalization of character traits described by Cheung et al. (2021), in which structured social environments facilitate the transition from compliance to self-regulation. Students' ability to apply religious values beyond school contexts further supports evidence that school culture can shape moral behavior when learning is perceived as authentic and socially meaningful (Febriani et al., 2020; Parhan et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate variations in the depth of internalization among students, highlighting the importance of differentiated support. Differences in religious literacy, family background, and personal motivation influenced students' engagement with religious culture learning. This aligns with studies emphasizing the need for contextual sensitivity and inclusive strategies in character education, particularly in diverse learning environments (Ekawati et al., 2018; Sumarna et al., 2022; Samsudi et al., 2024).

Evaluation findings, derived from triangulated interviews, observations, and document analysis, show that religious culture learning contributes positively to discipline, ethical awareness, and adherence to school norms. These outcomes are consistent with meta-analytic evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of well-designed character education programs in improving behavioral outcomes (Jeynes, 2019). At the same time, the identification of challenges, such as limited resources, time constraints, and digital distractions, reflects broader concerns in contemporary character education literature (Polat, 2023; Rutten et al., 2024).

The SWOT-based analysis further illustrates that the sustainability of religious culture learning depends on both internal institutional capacity and external support systems. Parental involvement emerged as a key enabling factor, reinforcing earlier research that highlights the importance of alignment between school and family environments in sustaining character development (Hossain & Ahmed, 2021; Dymnicki et al., 2025). Conversely, rapid social and technological change necessitates adaptive strategies, including reflective dialogue and responsible digital engagement within religious education (Hanafi et al., 2025; Pérez-Marín, 2021).

Overall, this study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by demonstrating that religious culture learning functions most effectively as a managed, whole-school pedagogical system rather than as a collection of isolated religious activities. By integrating structured planning, consistent implementation, and reflective evaluation, Islamic schools can foster character formation that is sustainable, context-sensitive, and responsive to contemporary challenges. This process-oriented perspective extends existing literature by clarifying how religious culture operates institutionally to shape students' religious character, offering practical insights for educators, school leaders, and policymakers committed to strengthening character education in Islamic educational settings.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in a single integrated Islamic junior secondary school, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other Islamic educational contexts with different institutional cultures, governance structures, or student demographics. Second, as a qualitative phenomenological study, the findings rely heavily on participants' perceptions and observed practices, which may be influenced by social desirability and researcher–participant interaction. Although data triangulation and continuous validation were applied to enhance credibility, the study did not incorporate longitudinal or quantitative measures that could capture changes in students' religious character over time or establish causal relationships between religious culture learning and behavioral outcomes.

Future research is therefore encouraged to extend this work in several directions. Comparative studies across multiple Islamic schools, including pesantren, madrasah, and public schools with Islamic programs, would provide a broader understanding of how religious culture learning operates in diverse institutional settings. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs

could also be employed to examine the sustainability of character formation and to measure its impact more systematically. In addition, future studies may explore the integration of digital and media-based religious learning within religious culture programs, particularly in response to contemporary social and technological challenges. Investigating students' family backgrounds, community influences, and teacher professional development related to religious culture learning would further enrich the understanding of how religion-based character education can be strengthened in both theory and practice.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that religious culture learning constitutes an effective and sustainable approach to shaping students' religious character when it is systematically planned, consistently implemented, and continuously evaluated as a whole-school pedagogical system. The findings show that integrating religious values into daily school routines, supported by active learning methods, varied learning media, teacher modeling, structured habituation practices, and collaboration with families and the wider community, contributes to positive behavioral change and the internalization of religious values beyond the classroom. At the same time, the study underscores the importance of reflective evaluation and contextual adaptation to address challenges related to diverse student backgrounds, resource constraints, and contemporary social and digital influences. By demonstrating that effective religion-based character education depends not only on routine habituation but also on strategic, reflective, and context-sensitive implementation, this study offers both theoretical contributions to Islamic education scholarship and practical implications for educators and policymakers seeking to strengthen sustainable character education in Islamic schools.

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