

INTEGRATING NATIONALIST CHARACTER AND SOCIAL CARE EDUCATION IN ISLAMIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Character education is a central concern in Islamic elementary schools as they are expected to cultivate students' religious values alongside nationalist attitudes and social responsibility in an increasingly complex social context. This study aims to examine the implementation of nationalist character education and social care education, including the strategies employed, challenges encountered, and outcomes achieved in an Islamic Elementary School. The research employed a qualitative descriptive method with a case study design and collected data through in-depth interviews and document analysis. The findings indicate that nationalist character education has been systematically integrated into school culture through routine activities such as flag ceremonies, morning assemblies, and the practice of national songs, thereby effectively fostering students' sense of national identity. In contrast, social care education is implemented mainly through community-based programs, including charitable activities such as distributing rice packages to underprivileged communities. However, the study also reveals persistent challenges in strengthening students' social sensitivity, particularly regarding environmental cleanliness and empathy toward others. These results highlight an imbalance between the development of nationalist values and social care behaviors. This research implies that Islamic educational institutions need more holistic and consistent strategies to integrate nationalist character education and social care within Islamic education curricula to enhance students' moral, civic, and social responsibility.

Keywords: Character education, Educational Management, Islamic Elementary Schools, Nationalism, Social responsibility, Values-based Education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, concerns over the decline of nationalist character and social morality have emerged as a global educational issue, reflected in increasing social problems such as violence, intolerance, moral degradation, and weakened social solidarity among younger generations (Fatah et al., 2025; Shilling & Mellor, 2022). These phenomena indicate that education systems worldwide face growing challenges in nurturing students' moral integrity, civic responsibility, and social awareness amid rapid globalization, technological advancement, and cultural transformation (Mujoska Trpevska & Lažetić, 2025; Wilmot et al., 2025). As a result, character education has gained renewed attention as a strategic response to strengthening students' ethical foundations and social commitment across educational contexts (Dewi et al., 2024; Karim et al., 2023).

Character education is widely recognized as an essential component of formal education, aiming to develop learners into individuals who are faithful, morally upright, socially responsible, and intellectually capable (Zengin, 2025; Karim et al., 2025; Umar et al., 2024; Shilling & Mellor, 2021; Dewi & Nurkholis, 2022). At its core, character refers to enduring moral qualities, personal dispositions, and habitual behaviors that distinguish individuals and guide their interactions within society (Warsali et al., 2024; Karim et al., 2022). Education, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping character by internalizing values such as loyalty, discipline, creativity, and responsibility, which are fundamental to achieving broader national educational goals (Fahmi et al., 2025; Fernández et al., 2022).

Within this framework, nationalism and social morality are cultivated not only through formal instruction but also through collaborative efforts involving schools, families, and communities (Sakuma, 2025; Anggadwita et al., 2020; Cornelissen et al., 2021). Educational policies, such as the 2013 Curriculum and the National Movement for Mental Revolution, emphasize character formation by integrating values of religiosity, nationalism, integrity, mutual cooperation, and social care into teaching and school culture (Parhan et al., 2024; Siska et al., 2020; Woods et al., 2020). Nationalist character encompasses loyalty, appreciation for cultural diversity, discipline, obedience to the law, and love for the nation, while social care reflects empathy, cooperation, and concern for others' well-being (Bay et al., 2023; Hasan, 2021; Anggadwita et al., 2020).

Previous studies have demonstrated that character education positively influences students' academic achievement, behavior, and social interaction (Blair et al., 2021; Bennett-Weston et al., 2023). Research also highlights that nationalism must be intentionally nurtured among students to counter the negative effects of globalization and cultural homogenization (Brubaker, 2020; Yang & Chen, 2021). In addition, social care education has been identified as a vital dimension of character development, promoting empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility in increasingly individualistic societies (Nikkola et al., 2022; Rinne et al., 2022). However, many studies have examined nationalism and social care separately, with limited attention to their integrated implementation in school settings.

Despite growing scholarly attention to character education, research that specifically explores the integration of nationalist character and social care within Islamic elementary education remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on general character education or moral instruction without sufficiently examining how Islamic educational institutions manage, balance, and contextualize these values in daily practices (Mellor & Shilling, 2021; Rinne et al., 2022). This gap is particularly evident in Islamic primary schools, where religious values, national identity, and social responsibility are expected to be harmoniously developed. Addressing this gap, the present study offers a novel contribution by examining the integrated implementation of nationalist character education and social care within an Islamic Elementary School context.

METHOD

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining perspectives on nationalism, character education, and Islamic educational leadership to examine the management of nationalist and social care character education in Islamic elementary schools. Nationalism is conceptualized as an attitudinal and behavioral orientation reflecting loyalty and responsibility toward the nation, drawing on Mylonas and Tudor (2021) and Huddy et al. (2021). Character and social character development are understood through the character education framework of Siska et al. (2020) and the sociological perspective of social character proposed by Shilling and Mellor (2021, 2022), which emphasize value internalization through school culture, habituation, and social interaction. To contextualize these processes within Islamic education, this study employs an Islamic education management and leadership lens, drawing on Karim et

al. (2023a) and Karim et al. (2022), and is supported by empirical evidence from Herawati Jalaludin et al. (2023), which highlights the influence of school leadership on character formation. Guided by this framework, the study employs a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore how nationalist and social care values are enacted and sustained in everyday practices at Islamic Elementary School Kedungdawa, Cirebon Regency (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The study focuses on the management of nationalist and social care character education as embedded in formal learning, school culture, and extracurricular activities. Informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure direct involvement in character education programs (Creswell, 2017), including the principal, curriculum and classroom teachers, a school committee representative, and students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, with interviews conducted with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to facilitate the flexible exploration of emerging themes (Kholik et al., 2020). Documentary sources, such as school vision and mission statements, curriculum plans, and character education records, provided contextual depth and supported data triangulation (Kegler et al., 2019). Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to strategies, challenges, and outcomes of nationalist and social care education (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on qualitative data obtained from interviews, document analysis, and field observations at Islamic Elementary School (IES) Kedungdawa, Cirebon Regency. The results are organized to reflect the study's analytical framework, focusing on the institutional context, leadership, and management practices, and the implementation and outcomes of nationalist and social care character education. The analysis highlights how these values are planned, enacted, and monitored within formal learning, school culture, and extracurricular activities, while also identifying challenges and variations in students' everyday behaviors. Through this organization, the results provide a comprehensive account of the dynamics shaping character education at the school.

Institutional Context of Character Education at IES Kedungdawa

Character education at Islamic Elementary School (IES) Kedungdawa is positioned as a core institutional mandate aimed at developing students' moral character, social competence, and readiness to respond to contemporary social challenges. The Principal emphasized that the school's responsibility extends beyond academic instruction to strengthening students' moral foundations in response to globalization, stating that IES Kedungdawa is "*committed to implementing character education... to reduce the negative impact of globalization on students' attitudes*" (Principal, IES Kedungdawa, September 29, 2022). Within this vision, nationalism and social care are prioritized values shaping learning and school culture. The Curriculum Teacher confirmed that character education planning involves multiple stakeholders, including the principal, teachers, and the school committee, and is aligned with the 2013 Curriculum, which serves as the foundation for strengthening students' social attitudes and nationalism (Curriculum Teacher; Principal, IES Kedungdawa, September 29, 2022). This commitment is supported by institutional resources, including multimedia facilities, national imagery, and spaces for ceremonial and social activities, funded through School Operational Assistance (BOS). However, triangulation revealed differing views regarding the effectiveness of these resources and limited monitoring of students' character application beyond school, indicating the need for stronger alignment between program planning, resource use, and everyday character practice.

Leadership and Management of Nationalist and Social Care Education

Leadership and management play a central role in the implementation of nationalist and social care character education at IES Kedungdawa. The principal serves as the primary leader responsible for planning, supervising, and evaluating character education programs, coordinating with teachers and the school committee. Character education is systematically planned through scheduled programs and clear task assignments to ensure effective implementation (Principal, IES Kedungdawa, September 29, 2022). Supervision is conducted through regular semesterly evaluations, enabling the principal to monitor progress, assess program effectiveness, and adjust strategies to maintain alignment with the school's educational goals.

Managerial leadership at IES Kedungdawa is reflected in the integrated execution of planning, organizing, implementation, and monitoring functions. Organizing is achieved by involving all teachers, homeroom, subject, and religious education teachers, in character education activities, indicating a participatory management approach (Principal, IES Kedungdawa, September 29, 2022). Beyond managerial practices, leadership also demonstrates spiritual dimensions through the modeling of Islamic values and moral conduct. Teachers reinforce this leadership by integrating character values into daily instruction and by modeling behavior, while the school committee supports parental involvement and program evaluation. Together, these collaborative leadership roles create a coherent management structure that sustains nationalist and social care character education in the Islamic elementary school context.

Implementation of Nationalist Character Education

Nationalist character education at IES Kedungdawa is integrated into both the formal curriculum and daily school practices. In the curriculum, nationalist values are embedded in subjects such as Citizenship Education and Islamic Religious Education, emphasizing loyalty, discipline, respect for diversity, and civic responsibility. The Principal noted that the 2013 Curriculum provides the main foundation for strengthening students' social attitudes and nationalism, ensuring that these values are systematically incorporated into learning objectives and classroom instruction (Principal, IES Kedungdawa, September 29, 2022). Through this approach, nationalism functions as a guiding value framework rather than a separate subject.

Beyond formal instruction, nationalism is reinforced through routine school practices such as flag ceremonies, morning assemblies, and the singing of mandatory national songs. These activities habituate students to national symbols and rituals and are consistently scheduled to foster a sense of pride and belonging (Principal, IES Kedungdawa, September 29, 2022). Teachers observed that students generally demonstrate discipline and active participation during these activities, indicating emerging national awareness. Overall, nationalist character education at IES Kedungdawa is perceived as consistently implemented and effective at the level of participation and routine practice. However, deeper internalization beyond observable behavior remains an area for ongoing development.

Implementation of Social Care Education

Social care education at IES Kedungdawa is primarily implemented through extracurricular and community-based activities that provide students with direct experiences of empathy and social responsibility. These activities include school-based community service, visiting sick students and teachers, and distributing zakat, infaq, and alms during Islamic religious celebrations. As explained by the Principal, social care education is carried out through *"community service at school, visiting sick students or teachers, and giving zakat, infaq, or alms on Islamic religious holidays"* (Principal, IES Kedungdawa, September 29, 2022). Teachers and school leaders

view these activities as habituation processes, supported by parental involvement, to embed Islamic values of compassion, cooperation, and mutual assistance beyond formal instruction.

Observations and teacher testimonies indicate that students generally demonstrate polite and cooperative behavior during structured and supervised activities, showing enthusiasm and responsiveness when guided to help peers. However, inconsistencies appear in unstructured daily contexts, where spontaneous empathy, helping behavior, and concern for cleanliness are less evident. Teachers noted that students tend to show social care *“when activities are organized by the school, but less consistently in daily situations that are not formally monitored”* (Teacher, IES Kedungdawa, September 2022). This gap between program intentions and everyday behavior suggests that while social care education is effective during formal activities, its internalization as a sustained daily habit remains uneven, underscoring the need for stronger reinforcement in daily routines and closer collaboration with families.

School Culture and Habituation Processes

School culture at IES Kedungdawa shapes students' character through continuous habituation embedded in daily school life. Character values such as nationalism and social care are repeatedly introduced through routine activities, including flag ceremonies, collective prayers, community service, and charitable programs. These recurring practices establish shared norms of discipline, cooperation, and care, enabling character education to become part of students' everyday school experience rather than a standalone instructional activity.

Informal school culture further influences the internalization of character values. Observations during recess, classroom transitions, and unstructured interactions indicate that students' social care behaviors vary across contexts. While some students demonstrate cooperation and mutual assistance during play and group activities, such behaviors are not consistently sustained, with instances of limited spontaneous empathy and neglect of cleanliness also observed. These findings suggest that informal settings serve as critical spaces where the depth of character internalization is tested beyond formal programs.

Peer interactions and teacher modeling play key roles in sustaining habituation. Students often mirror peer behavior during group work and recreational activities, with cooperative peer dynamics encouraging helping behaviors. Teacher modeling remains influential, as students are more likely to practice social care when teachers demonstrate and reinforce expected conduct. On the contrary, the reduced consistency of caring behaviors in unsupervised contexts indicates that while school culture supports character formation, the development of self-initiated and enduring habits requires continued reinforcement through peer norms and sustained informal practice.

Challenges in Integrating Nationalism and Social Care

Despite systematic planning, IES Kedungdawa faces institutional and pedagogical challenges in integrating nationalist and social care education. Scheduling conflicts with programs organized by the Education Office sometimes disrupt the consistent implementation of planned character education activities, as noted by the Curriculum Teacher (IES Kedungdawa, September 29, 2022). Pedagogically, teachers also encounter difficulties in ensuring that character values are internalized beyond formal instruction, particularly in monitoring students' behavior outside structured and supervised activities.

Differences in effectiveness between nationalist and social care education further complicate integration efforts. Nationalist character education is reinforced through routine and symbolic practices, making it more consistently observed, while social care education depends on situational activities that occur less frequently and require closer supervision. External factors such as family background, technology exposure, and varying levels of parental involvement

also influence students' behavior, contributing to inconsistencies in everyday practice. Although students actively participate in organized programs, their self-initiated engagement with character values remains uneven, highlighting the need for stronger alignment between school-based initiatives, informal school culture, and external social environments.

Outcomes of Character Education Programs

The findings indicate a perceived positive development of nationalist character among students at IES Kedungdawa, as reflected in their consistent participation in routine national activities. School leaders and teachers expressed confidence that character education programs have strengthened students' sense of national identity, discipline, and respect for national symbols. These outcomes are most visible during formal and ritualized practices such as flag ceremonies, national songs, and commemorative events, where students generally demonstrate orderly behavior and adherence to expected norms.

In contrast, outcomes related to social care education are more situational and less consistently observed. Although teachers and school leaders believe that social care programs enhance students' awareness of empathy and responsibility, positive behaviors are primarily evident during structured activities such as community service and charitable programs. Students tend to show enthusiasm and participation in these contexts; however, social care behaviors are less consistently reflected in students' everyday, self-initiated actions, indicating a weaker level of internalization compared to nationalist character education.

At the student level, evidence of character education outcomes remains largely context-dependent. Teachers reported that both nationalist and social care behaviors are more apparent during supervised activities, while concrete indicators of sustained behavioral change, such as spontaneous helping, peer support, and consistent cleanliness, appear only sporadically. Overall, while nationalist character education demonstrates stronger and more stable outcomes, the findings highlight ongoing challenges in transforming program participation into enduring social care dispositions.

Strategies for Strengthening Nationalist and Social Care Education

The results indicate that character education at IES Kedungdawa is institutionally well established and supported by strong leadership, alignment with the 2013 Curriculum, and participatory management involving teachers, parents, and the school committee. Nationalism and social care are positioned as core values and implemented through structured planning, routine school activities, supervision, and adequate infrastructure supported by BOS funding. Nationalist character education is particularly consistent and visible through curriculum integration and ritualized practices such as flag ceremonies and national songs, resulting in observable student discipline and participation.

To strengthen implementation, several strategic practices are already in place, including collaboration with parents and the school committee, teacher observation and feedback, and leadership-led evaluation. These strategies extend character education beyond the classroom, reinforce expected behaviors through guidance and reflection, and allow the school to identify implementation gaps and make adjustments. On the other hand, social care education, while grounded in Islamic values and implemented through community service and charitable activities, shows more situational outcomes and weaker internalization in everyday student behavior. Overall, the findings suggest that character education at IES Kedungdawa is effective at the level of program implementation and compliance, but strengthening social care values requires closer integration between formal programs, informal school culture, and sustained family involvement.

The findings of this study can be comprehensively interpreted through the integrated framework of nationalism, character education, and Islamic educational leadership. In line with the conceptualization of nationalism as an attitudinal and behavioral orientation reflecting loyalty and responsibility toward the nation (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021; Huddy et al., 2021), the results demonstrate that nationalist character education at IES Kedungdawa is implemented consistently through curriculum integration and ritualized school practices. The incorporation of nationalist values into formal subjects, combined with routine activities such as flag ceremonies and national commemorations, has contributed to observable student discipline, participation, and respect for national symbols. These findings suggest that nationalism, when reinforced through structured and symbolic practices, is more readily translated into visible student behavior within the school context.

From a character and social character perspective, the findings also support the arguments of Siska et al. (2020) and Shilling and Mellor (2021, 2022), who emphasize that character formation relies on processes of habituation, school culture, and social interaction. While social care values are effectively introduced through structured programs such as community service and charitable activities, their uneven expression in students' everyday, self-initiated behavior indicates that internalization remains partial and context-dependent. This gap highlights the limitations of formal character education programs when they are not consistently reinforced through informal school culture, peer interactions, and daily routines. Consequently, the findings underscore the importance of extending character education beyond formal activities to strengthen the transformation of social care values into enduring dispositions among students.

From an Islamic education management and leadership lens, the results align with Karim et al. (2023a) and Karim et al. (2022), demonstrating that strong managerial and spiritual leadership by the principal shapes planning, implementation, and supervision of character education, supported by collaboration among teachers and the school committee. This integrated management process, encompassing planning, organizing, implementation, and supervision, ensures that character education is systematically embedded within school routines, consistent with management-oriented perspectives emphasizing structured coordination and goal clarity (Umar et al., 2025; Siska et al., 2020; Purnomo et al., 2024; Anwar et al., 2025; Norman et al., 2023). In line with Cornelissen et al. (2021), collaborative planning and collective responsibility strengthen character-building initiatives; however, as Herawati Jalaludin et al. (2023) and Rosyad et al. (2025) note, leadership efforts need to extend beyond institutional routines to foster more profound and more sustainable internalization of social care values among students (Herawati Jalaludin et al., 2023; Rosyad et al., 2025; Widiyanti et al., 2022).

The organizing function of character education at IES Kedungdawa further reinforces the effectiveness of this management approach. A clear role distribution, coordinated task assignments, and the involvement of all teachers across subject areas reflect a participatory organizational structure that supports consistent character education practices (Muassomah et al., 2025). Such an approach corresponds with organizational management principles emphasizing transparency, coordination, and shared responsibility as foundations for effective program implementation (Mustakim & Kamal, 2021). By positioning character education as a collective responsibility rather than a subject-specific task, the school strengthens the integration of nationalist and social care values across formal learning, extracurricular activities, and daily school interactions (AR et al., 2025).

In terms of implementation, the results indicate that nationalist character education is more consistently enacted than social care education. Nationalist values are reinforced through routine and symbolic practices such as flag ceremonies, national commemorations, and the singing of national songs, which foster discipline, collective identity, and respect for national

symbols. These findings are in line with broader scholarship on nationalism as a social and behavioral orientation shaped through repeated symbolic practices and institutional rituals (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021; Huddy et al., 2021). By contrast, social care education, although grounded in Islamic values and implemented through community service and charitable activities, shows more situational outcomes. This pattern supports the argument of Shilling and Mellor (2021, 2022) that social character is shaped through habituation and interdependence but remains vulnerable to inconsistency when not reinforced across everyday social contexts. Similar findings were reported by Nikkola et al. (2022), who found that social care and empathy among students require sustained reinforcement beyond structured programs to become enduring dispositions.

As a result, supervision and evaluation emerge as critical mechanisms for maintaining the continuity and quality of character education at IES Kedungdawa. Regular evaluations conducted by the principal, supported by teacher feedback and stakeholder input, function as reflective processes aimed at identifying challenges and improving implementation. This approach aligns with perspectives that view supervision as a developmental and corrective process rather than merely administrative control (Mellor & Shilling, 2021). The use of reflection, feedback, and follow-up actions to address program weaknesses corresponds with findings by Budiyaniti et al. (2021), who emphasize that continuous evaluation is essential for sustaining character education initiatives in Islamic educational settings. Moreover, the use of spontaneous feedback and warnings by teachers reflects everyday pedagogical strategies that reinforce character values through direct interaction and example (Shilling & Mellor, 2022; Meilana et al., 2024).

Overall, this study confirms that while management frameworks provide a strong structural foundation for character education, their effectiveness depends on contextual adaptation and cultural relevance. At IES Kedungdawa, the integration of managerial practices with Islamic values and local cultural norms strengthens the formation of nationalist character but is less effective in ensuring the sustained internalization of social care behaviors. These findings reinforce earlier studies suggesting that character education outcomes are more durable when formal management structures are complemented by informal school culture, peer interaction, and family involvement (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Nikkola et al., 2022). Consequently, the study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that effective character education in Islamic elementary schools requires not only systematic management but also sustained habituation and multi-contextual reinforcement to transform program participation into enduring student character.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged and addressed in future research. As a qualitative case study conducted in a single Islamic elementary school, the findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable to other educational settings with different institutional cultures, leadership practices, or community backgrounds. In addition, the study relies primarily on interview data and school-based observations, which capture perceptions and observed behaviors but provide limited evidence of long-term behavioral change, particularly in relation to students' social care internalization outside the school environment. Future studies are therefore encouraged to employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine character development over time and to incorporate student-level behavioral and attitudinal measures. Comparative research across multiple Islamic schools and increased attention to family and community contexts would also offer deeper insight into how nationalist and social care values can be more sustainably internalized as enduring student character.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that nationalist and social care character education at IES Kedungdawa is institutionally well established and supported by coherent leadership and management practices encompassing planning, organizing, implementation, and supervision. The findings show that nationalist character education is implemented consistently through curriculum integration and routine school practices, resulting in observable student discipline and participation in national activities. In contrast, social care education, although grounded in Islamic values and implemented through community service and charitable programs, demonstrates less consistent internalization in students' everyday behavior. These results indicate that while the school has successfully embedded character education at the program and institutional levels, challenges remain in translating structured activities into sustained social care habits. Overall, the study highlights the importance of aligning management practices, school culture, and family involvement to strengthen the internalization of character values, offering practical implications for Islamic elementary schools seeking to balance nationalism and social responsibility within character education.

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