



Teachers' Strategies in Islamic Religious Education for Developing Students' Religious Character in a Vocational School

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article History:

Received: Juni 2025

Revised: Juli 2025

Accepted: Agustus 2025

Keywords:

learning strategies, Islamic Religious Education, religious character, vocational school, SMK

DOI:

10.71280/jotter.v3i1.530

ABSTRACT

The integration of religious character education in vocational schools is an urgent need, as students are not only prepared for academic and professional competencies but also required to possess strong spiritual and moral foundations. This study aimed to explore the learning strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in strengthening students' religious character at SMK Islam Terpadu Al-Hidayah. This research applied a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with PAI teachers and students, classroom observations, and documentation analysis. The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's interactive model, while data credibility was ensured through triangulation and member checking. The findings revealed three main strategies applied by PAI teachers. First, role modeling, in which teachers consistently exemplified religious values through daily attitudes and behaviors. Second, habituation strategies, including structured religious routines such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and dhikr. Third, integration of religious values into learning, in which Islamic teachings were contextualized with academic subjects and vocational practices, making them relevant to students' personal and professional lives. In conclusion, the synergy of these strategies created a holistic and practical approach to character education that effectively strengthened students' religiosity and discipline. The study recommends that vocational schools institutionalize religious character education alongside academic and vocational training to better prepare students for both workplace competence and ethical responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia is currently expected not only to produce graduates with academic competence but also to shape learners with strong character, integrity, and religious values. Global challenges demand that the younger generation become not only intellectually competent but also spiritually and morally resilient (Ruswandi et al., 2023). The increasing cases of moral decline among adolescents, particularly students in vocational high schools (SMK), indicate that the success of education cannot be measured solely by cognitive achievements, but must also include the internalization of religious values and character (Khairunisa & Firdaus, 2023; Sopiah et al., 2024).



Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is an integral component of the Indonesian national education system because it addresses not only intellectual development but also moral and spiritual growth. In vocational schools, where students are being prepared to face both academic challenges and professional environments, PAI plays a significant role in instilling religious values that serve as a moral compass (Firdaus et al., 2022; Firdaus & Erihadiana, 2022). The integration of knowledge, values, and practice in PAI ensures that students do not merely acquire theoretical understanding of Islamic teachings, but also learn how to apply them in their daily interactions.

The importance of PAI becomes even more evident when viewed in the context of character education. Adolescents in vocational schools are at a stage where they are highly influenced by social, cultural, and digital environments, which may expose them to both positive and negative values. Through PAI, students are guided to strengthen their identity as Muslims by internalizing virtues such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and respect. These values form the basis of religious character that is essential not only for personal development but also for professional readiness, particularly in service-oriented fields like tourism and business (Maufiroh & Sa'i, 2024).

Thus, the success of PAI cannot be measured solely by cognitive outcomes, such as the ability to recall religious knowledge, but by the extent to which it contributes to character transformation. Effective PAI empowers students to translate religious knowledge into daily behavior, shaping them into individuals who are competent, ethical, and spiritually grounded (Dewi et al., 2021; Häkkinen et al., 2017; Zahfa et al., 2025). This dual focus academic competence and moral formation makes PAI a cornerstone of holistic education, ensuring that vocational school graduates are not only skilled professionals but also individuals with strong religious character capable of contributing positively to society.

Vocational schools play a strategic role as they prepare students to enter the workforce while at the same time nurturing professional attitudes grounded in religious values. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers are not merely responsible for delivering cognitive content but also for serving as role models, fostering religious practices, and instilling students' religious character (Munita et al., 2023). Therefore, the learning strategies employed by PAI teachers need to be innovative, contextual, and adapted to the psychological development of vocational students, who tend to be critical, dynamic, and highly exposed to social and digital influences (Sofianti & Rohana, 2023).

In practice, the implementation of religious character education in many secondary schools often remains formalistic, limited to ceremonial routines or slogans without deep value internalization (Saepuloh et al., 2023). This situation is exacerbated by the influence of popular culture, social media, and modern lifestyles that are frequently inconsistent with Islamic values. Such conditions underline the urgency of effective, systematic, and sustainable learning strategies in strengthening the religious character of SMK students.

Previous studies emphasize that the success of religious character education is largely determined by the involvement of all school components, particularly school leadership and PAI learning strategies. (Bandur et al., 2022; Isa et al., 2020) highlight the importance of school-based management that allows teachers the space to innovate in instilling character values according to students' needs. Meanwhile, (Amalia, 2023) found that integrating religious values into PAI learning through modeling, habituation, and strengthening school culture significantly improved student discipline and responsibility at the secondary level.

In the context of SMK Islam Terpadu Al-Hidayah, PAI teachers face unique challenges: they must balance academic achievement, vocational readiness, and the cultivation of students' religious character. This school emphasizes learning that integrates Islamic values with professional skills development. Hence, the learning strategies of PAI teachers are crucial in creating a learning

environment that not only equips students with workplace competencies but also nurtures noble character and religiosity as a foundation for real-life challenges.

The urgency of this study lies in exploring concrete strategies of PAI teachers in strengthening students' religious character in vocational schools, considering the challenges of modern adolescence and the dynamics of vocational education. This research focuses on describing the learning strategies employed by PAI teachers at SMK Islam Terpadu Al-Hidayah, identifying supporting and inhibiting factors, and analyzing their relevance to the development of students' religious character.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to explore and understand the strategies used by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in their natural classroom settings and social contexts (Cresswell, 2019; Creswell & Clark, 2017). The case study design was chosen as it provides an in-depth understanding of a bounded system, namely the learning strategies of PAI teachers at SMK Islam Terpadu Al-Hidayah (Adrias & Ruswandi, 2025; Yin, 2017).

The participants consisted of PAI teachers and students at SMK Islam Terpadu Al-Hidayah. The teachers were selected purposively, as they were directly involved in the implementation of learning strategies aimed at strengthening religious character. Several students were also included as supporting participants to provide insights into their experiences and responses toward the strategies used by teachers.

In this qualitative study, the researcher acted as the primary instrument (human instrument) who interacted directly with participants and the research context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Supporting instruments included: Interview guidelines, to obtain detailed information regarding teachers' strategies and students' responses. Observation sheets, to record classroom practices, student engagement, and the integration of religious values. Documentation analysis, including lesson plans, teaching materials, and school programs that supported religious character education. Data Collection Procedures.

Data were collected through three main techniques: In-depth interviews with PAI teachers to explore their learning strategies, challenges, and reflections. Non-participant observations in classroom activities to understand how strategies were implemented in practice. Documentation analysis of lesson plans, syllabi, and records of religious programs at the school.

The triangulation of these three methods ensured that the findings were rich, contextual, and reliable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2014). Data were analyzed using the interactive model of (Miles et al., 2014), which consists of three stages; Data reduction: selecting, simplifying, and focusing on relevant data from interviews, observations, and documents; Data display: organizing the data in narrative and tabular forms to identify patterns and themes; Conclusion drawing and verification: interpreting the findings, verifying them against the data, and refining emerging themes.

The analysis process was conducted simultaneously with data collection to enable ongoing reflection and adaptation. The validity of the data was ensured by applying (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through triangulation of data sources and member checking with participants. Transferability was maintained by providing thick descriptions of the research context. Dependability and confirmability were strengthened by maintaining an audit trail and systematic documentation of the research process (Shenton, 2004).

RESULTS

Role Modeling (*Keteladanan Guru*)

The first finding reveals that PAI teachers at SMK Islam Terpadu Al-Hidayah placed a strong emphasis on role modeling as the core strategy in strengthening students' religious character. Based on classroom observations and interviews, teachers consistently demonstrated religious practices such as greeting students with Islamic salutations, leading prayers before and after lessons, and showing respectful behavior towards colleagues and students. These practices were not only instructional but also intended to set an example for students to emulate.

During interviews, one teacher stated:

"We cannot merely instruct students to behave religiously; we must embody those values ourselves. When students see us praying on time, greeting with salam, and treating others politely, they naturally learn to do the same." (PAI Teacher, Interview, March 2025).

Observation data further supported this statement. In several classroom sessions, teachers were observed integrating short reminders (*tausiyah*) during the lesson, particularly when discussing moral aspects of Islamic teachings. Teachers also modeled patience and discipline by maintaining punctuality and managing the class with calm authority.

Documentation in the form of school programs showed that the role modeling strategy extended beyond the classroom. Teachers actively participated in extracurricular religious activities such as *sholat dhuba* in congregation, *tadarus Al-Qur'an*, and *istighosah* sessions, thereby reinforcing the culture of religiosity within the school environment.

Students acknowledged the positive influence of this role modeling. One student explained: *"Seeing our teachers practice what they teach makes us more motivated to follow. It feels real, not just theory."* (Student, Interview, March 2025).

These findings indicate that role modeling served as a powerful and practical strategy to instill religious character. It provided students with daily examples of how Islamic values are lived, rather than merely taught. This strategy aligns with the principle that character education is most effective when values are internalized through consistent examples (Lickona, 2012)

Habituation Strategies

The second finding shows that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers applied habituation strategies to strengthen students' religious character. These strategies were implemented through structured daily, weekly, and monthly routines designed to cultivate religious practices and discipline among students.

Observation results indicated that students were consistently engaged in religious activities before, during, and after lessons. For instance, every class session began with a joint recitation of prayers, followed by *tilawah* or short verses from the Qur'an. Students were also encouraged to perform *shalat dhuba* in congregation before classes commenced. These practices were not optional but had become part of the school's religious culture.

One teacher emphasized in the interview:

"We want religious values to become a habit for our students, not just something they do occasionally. By repeating these practices daily, they become part of their character." (PAI Teacher, Interview, March 2025).

Documentation confirmed that the school had established programs such as *Tadarus Al-Qur'an every Friday*, *Dzikir and Doa Together*, and *Monthly Istighosah*. Teachers acted as facilitators and supervisors during these activities, ensuring students' participation and consistency.

Students' responses also reflected the effectiveness of habituation strategies. A student explained:

“At first, waking up earlier for dbuha was difficult, but because it’s a routine here, I got used to it. Now I even feel incomplete if I miss it.” (Student, Interview, March 2025).

From classroom observations, it was also noted that habituation fostered discipline and responsibility. Students came to class on time because prayer schedules required punctuality. Moreover, peer influence played a positive role, as students encouraged each other to follow routines.

The habituation strategy thus created an environment where religious practices became embedded in students' daily behavior. This finding supports (Lickona, 2012) concept that character formation is strengthened when moral and religious practices are habituated consistently, transforming values into lived experiences rather than abstract concepts.

Integration of Religious Values in Learning

The third finding highlights that PAI teachers integrated religious values into classroom learning activities as part of their strategy to strengthen students' religious character. Unlike role modeling and habituation, which were more behavioral and cultural, this strategy emphasized the internalization of Islamic values through the learning process itself.

Observation data revealed that during PAI lessons, teachers did not limit themselves to delivering the curriculum content. Instead, they contextualized lessons with examples relevant to students' daily lives and future vocational roles. For example, when teaching about honesty (*shidq*), teachers related it to workplace ethics, such as being trustworthy in handling financial transactions or providing accurate information in tourism services—an area directly relevant to vocational students.

A PAI teacher explained in the interview:

“Students must understand that values such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility are not only Islamic teachings but also professional requirements. When they work in tourism or other industries, these values will define their credibility.” (PAI Teacher, Interview, March 2025).

In addition, teachers consistently integrated Qur'anic verses and hadith into classroom discussions, ensuring that religious values were the foundation for academic learning. Documentation in the form of lesson plans showed that teachers explicitly included character-building objectives alongside cognitive goals. For instance, a lesson plan on *iman kepada Allah* contained specific objectives such as strengthening students' gratitude and encouraging environmental stewardship as an expression of faith.

Students' perspectives also supported this approach. One student stated: *“I feel that learning PAI is not just about memorizing. When teachers explain how values apply in our daily lives and even in our future jobs, it makes me realize religion is very relevant.”* (Student, Interview, March 2025).

Furthermore, integration was not limited to PAI subjects alone. Collaboration with other teachers allowed cross-curricular embedding of values. For instance, during entrepreneurship lessons, religious values such as honesty and fairness in business were reinforced. This interdisciplinary approach contributed to a holistic formation of students' religious character.

This finding aligns with (Amalia, 2023), who reported that embedding religious values into the learning process through contextualization and interdisciplinary approaches significantly enhances the internalization of character education. It also resonates with Isa et al. (2020), who emphasized that the integration of religion and vocational learning is crucial in shaping students who are both competent and morally grounded.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SMK Islam Terpadu Al-Hidayah employed three primary strategies to strengthen students' religious character: role modeling, habituation, and integration of religious values in learning. These strategies are interrelated and collectively contribute to building a school culture rooted in religiosity and character development.

First, the role modeling strategy proved to be the most influential. Teachers consistently acted as exemplars of religious practice through their behavior, language, and discipline. This aligns with (Lickona, 2012) assertion that character education is most effective when teachers model the values they wish to instill. Students' testimonies also confirmed that observing their teachers' consistent practice of religious values motivated them to follow suit. Similar findings were reported by (Samrin, 2014), who found that teacher role modeling significantly shaped students' spiritual attitudes in Islamic schools.

Second, habituation strategies ensured that religious practices became part of students' daily routines. Through regular prayers, Qur'an recitation, and dhikr, students internalized values such as discipline, responsibility, and devotion. This is consistent with Althof and Berkowitz (2006), who argued that repetition and structured routines are essential for transforming moral knowledge into habitual practice. Studies by (Cahyanto et al., 2024; Guna & Yuwantiningrum, 2024; Udemba, 2024) also confirm that consistent religious routines in schools enhance students' moral awareness and strengthen their religious identity.

Third, integrating religious values into learning activities emphasized the relevance of Islamic teachings to academic and vocational contexts. Teachers contextualized lessons with real-life and workplace applications, thereby making values like honesty, discipline, and responsibility both religious and professional imperatives. This supports (Isa et al., 2020), who found that integrating religion into vocational education fosters both competence and ethical integrity. Similarly, (Amalia, 2023) reported that character-based learning objectives within lesson plans significantly increased students' sense of responsibility and discipline.

When compared with prior studies, this research confirms the importance of combining pedagogical and cultural strategies in character education. While previous studies often highlighted either teacher role modeling (Munita et al., 2023) or habituation (Saepuloh et al., 2023), this study shows that a comprehensive approach integrating multiple strategies yields stronger results. This triangulated approach also resonates with (Bandur et al., 2022), who emphasized that character education must involve the entire school system, not just isolated activities.

An important implication of this study is that PAI teachers in vocational schools must go beyond classroom teaching and act as cultural leaders in the school environment. They are required to harmonize academic goals, vocational readiness, and moral formation. This supports the broader perspective of character education as both curricular and extracurricular, requiring synergy between classroom learning and school culture (Rahayu & Dong, 2023).

The findings also reveal that religious character development is not automatic but requires systematic reinforcement. Without consistent teacher role modeling and structured habituation, religious practices risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. This echoes the caution raised by (Salgado et al., 2025), who warned that superficial or ceremonial approaches to character education fail to achieve meaningful internalization.

Another critical point is that adolescents in vocational schools face unique challenges due to exposure to digital culture and modern lifestyles. This necessitates strategies that not only instill values but also help students critically navigate external influences. The contextualization of religious values

in vocational contexts, as observed in this study, provides students with a framework to apply Islamic teachings in real-world situations, particularly in their future professions.

Moreover, this study illustrates the importance of collaboration between teachers across subjects. By integrating religious values into non-religious subjects such as entrepreneurship, the school created a holistic educational environment. This interdisciplinary approach is in line with findings from Althof and (Salgado et al., 2025), who emphasized that character education is most effective when it permeates all aspects of schooling.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study reaffirms that character education requires both moral knowing and moral doing (Lickona, 2012). Role modeling and habituation ensure moral doing, while integration of values into lessons enhances moral knowing. The synergy of these elements fosters comprehensive character development that prepares students to be both competent professionals and morally upright individuals.

Finally, the research highlights the broader implications for policy and practice. For policymakers, the findings suggest that vocational schools should prioritize character education alongside vocational training. For teachers, the study underscores the need to act simultaneously as instructors, role models, and facilitators of school culture. For students, the strategies employed provide not only spiritual guidance but also practical preparation for ethical challenges in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of strategies by Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in strengthening students' religious character at SDN 065 Cijerah is carried out through an integrative and contextual approach. The main strategies include teacher role modeling, habituation through religious activities, the integration of religious values across different subjects, and the application of constructive rewards and sanctions. These strategies are reinforced by several supporting factors, namely visionary school leadership, teacher collaboration, parental involvement, the availability of school facilities, and policy support through the *Sekolah Penggerak* (Driving School) Program. However, this study also identified several barriers that affect the effectiveness of implementation. These include differences in students' religious backgrounds, limited instructional time, lack of student discipline and consistency, insufficient specialized training for teachers in character education, as well as the influence of social environments and digital media. These challenges indicate that character education requires a systematic approach, sustained support, and multi-stakeholder engagement. In conclusion, school culture-based character education at SDN 065 Cijerah has made a tangible contribution to the development of students' religious character. Nevertheless, to achieve more optimal outcomes, there is a need to strengthen teachers' professional capacity, innovate teaching methods, and foster more intensive collaboration with parents and the wider community. The implications of this study affirm that a consistently and collaboratively managed school culture can serve as a strong foundation for sustainable character education.

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