THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHERS IN FORMING STUDENTS' RELIGIOUS CHARACTER THROUGH LEARNING ABILITY AND MORALITY

Umma Rohmah Sholekah [1]*, Meti Fatimah [2]
[1,2] Institut Islam Mamba'ul 'Ulum Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This study aims to describe the role of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) teachers in shaping students' religious character through Aqidah Akhlak instruction at MI Sultan Fatah Demak, Central Java, Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study involved 12 participants, including PAI teachers, the madrasah principal, and students. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and documentation, and analysed thematically. The findings show that PAI teachers play a strategic role as educators, spiritual guides, and moral role models in fostering students' religious discipline, moral awareness, social ethics, religious understanding, and self-control in responding to negative influences, including digital media. The internalisation of Islamic values is strengthened through the integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects in learning, supported by religious habituation practices and collaboration between the madrasah and families. However, this study is limited to a single madrasah in a specific geographic context, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings.

INTRODUCTION | مقدمة

Education is a deliberate human endeavour to transmit cultural, moral, and spiritual values across generations (Rahman BP et al., 2022). Within this process, religious education occupies a foundational position, as it aims to cultivate faith, moral integrity, and the practical application of religious values in daily life. In the Indonesian educational context, grounded in Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, religious education is formally positioned as a core pillar for the development of students' religious character and moral citizenship. Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI), in particular, seeks to internalise Islamic values that shape students' cognition, attitudes, and behaviour holistically (Firmansyah, 2019). This orientation aligns with the theoretical framework of value internalisation, which emphasises the integration of cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitudes and beliefs), and behavioural (practices) domains in character formation.

From a theoretical perspective, the role of teachers in religious character education can be understood through three interrelated frameworks: social learning theory, moral exemplarity,

and habituation theory. Social learning theory posits that students internalise values through observation and imitation of significant role models, particularly teachers. Moral exemplarity emphasises teachers as uswah hasanah, whose personal conduct becomes a living curriculum for students. Meanwhile, habituation theory highlights the importance of repetitive religious practices—such as congregational prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and daily moral routines—in transforming values into stable character traits. In the context of Islamic education, these frameworks are further reinforced by the objectives of maqāṣid al-syarī'ah, which orient education toward safeguarding faith (ḥifẓ al-dīn), intellect (ḥifẓ al-'aql), and moral integrity.

At the level of Islamic elementary education (madrasah ibtidaiyah), the subject of Aqidah Akhlak serves as a key pedagogical vehicle for religious character formation, as it explicitly addresses both belief structures and moral conduct. At MI Sultan Fatah, Islamic Religious Education teachers are entrusted not only with delivering doctrinal content but also with guiding students' moral development from an early age through exemplary behaviour, spiritual supervision, and structured religious habituation. However, empirical evidence indicates that religious character formation does not always progress optimally. Previous studies have identified persistent challenges, including moral decline among students, weak worship discipline, and the disruptive influence of digital media (Fatimah et al., 2021; Salsabila, 2024). Moreover, existing research highlights a tendency for PAI instruction to prioritise cognitive achievement at the expense of affective and behavioural internalisation (Rohmah, 2019), despite recommendations for contextual and experiential learning approaches (Nurjadid et al., 2025).

Although a growing body of literature discusses character education in Islamic schools, most studies examine it from a general curricular or institutional perspective. There remains a clear research gap regarding the specific pedagogical and relational roles of PAI teachers in the teaching of Aqidah Akhlak at the madrasah ibtidaiyah level, particularly in relation to how cognitive instruction, moral exemplarity, and religious habituation interact in shaping students' religious character within the contemporary digital context. Few studies have systematically analysed this role at the micro level of classroom practice and teacher–student interaction in a specific madrasah setting.

Therefore, this study makes an original contribution by developing an integrated conceptual framework that links teacher roles (educator, moral role model, and spiritual guide), Aqidah Akhlak pedagogy, and religious habituation practices to students' religious character outcomes. By focusing on MI Sultan Fatah as a contextual case, this research provides empirical insights into how Islamic Religious Education teachers operationalise theoretical principles of value internalisation and maqāṣid al-syarī'ah in daily learning practices. Unlike previous studies that emphasise curriculum design or general character outcomes, this study foregrounds the lived pedagogical practices of PAI teachers and their adaptive responses to digital-era challenges, thereby offering both theoretical enrichment and practical guidance for strengthening religious character education in Islamic elementary schools.

METHOD | منهج

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore in depth the role of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) teachers in shaping students' religious character, with the researcher acting as the primary research instrument (Sugiyono, 2010). The research was conducted at MI Sultan Fatah Demak, Central Java, Indonesia, from June to August

2025. Primary data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and direct interactions with participants, while secondary data were obtained from curriculum documents, lesson plans, religious activity programs, and madrasah archives. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and expanded through snowball sampling, resulting in 12 informants consisting of three Aqidah Akhlak teachers, one madrasah principal, and eight upper-grade students. The teachers had Islamic educational backgrounds with 7–18 years of teaching experience and were actively involved in religious habituation programs, while the principal had extensive experience in Islamic educational leadership.

Data collection involved non-participant observations across 12 learning sessions (60–90 minutes each), semi-structured interviews with teachers and the principal conducted in two sessions per participant (45–60 minutes each), and individual or small-group interviews with students lasting 30–45 minutes. Documentation studies were used to support and enrich the findings. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking, while reliability was strengthened through dependability and confirmability audits (Moleong, 2014; Sugiyono, 2007). Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, carried out continuously throughout the research process.

RESULT | نتائج

The results of the study indicate that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at MI Sultan Fatah play a central and multidimensional role in shaping students' religious character, particularly through Aqidah Akhlak learning, which serves as the core of fostering Islamic values, faith, and moral behaviour. The implementation of Aqidah Akhlak instruction is not limited to classroom knowledge transmission but extends to daily habituation and character reinforcement in students' lived experiences. Observational data show that teachers adopt an integrated approach that simultaneously develops understanding, attitudes, and behaviour. Learning activities typically begin with exemplary stories, explanations of Qur'anic verses or Hadith related to specific moral values, followed by reflective discussions on moral issues frequently encountered by students. As one teacher explained, "Teaching Akidah Akhlak is not only about explaining concepts, but about helping students feel and practise those values in their daily lives" (PAI Teacher 1).

In practice, Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Sultan Fatah function not only as instructors but also as primary moral role models. Teachers' everyday conduct—including their manner of speaking, patience, discipline, and consistency in worship—becomes a living example for students. This finding strongly supports Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasises learning through observation and imitation of significant figures. Interview data reveal that students tend to internalise moral teachings more effectively when they witness their teachers practising those values. As one student stated, "I try to pray on time and speak politely because I see my teacher doing that every day at school" (Student 4). This empirical evidence reinforces Rif'an's (2023) findings that teacher exemplarity is a decisive factor in successful religious character formation in Islamic elementary schools.

Beyond modelling behaviour, PAI teachers also act as spiritual guides by facilitating structured and consistent religious habituation. At MI Sultan Fatah, daily activities such as morning Qur'anic recitation, congregational Dhuha and Dhuhur prayers, rotating religious talks, and routine charity programs are embedded into the school culture. These practices foster

discipline, spiritual awareness, and self-control through repetition and active student involvement. A teacher highlighted this process by stating, "When religious practices become routine, students no longer feel forced; they practise them naturally" (PAI Teacher 2). This finding aligns with Adawiyah's (2024) research, which emphasises that sustainable habituation supported by a religious school environment has a long-term impact on students' character development.

In classroom instruction, Aqidah Akhlak teachers employ contextual learning approaches to connect moral values with students' real-life experiences. For example, lessons on honesty and responsibility are linked to situations in the classroom, cafeteria, and playground. Teachers also utilise storytelling, role-playing, group discussions, and affective assessment through behavioural observation to ensure that moral values are internalised rather than merely memorised. These findings corroborate Aprillia's (2025) study, which demonstrated that contextual Islamic Religious Education significantly enhances students' moral awareness and value internalisation.

The study further identified supporting factors that strengthen teachers' roles, including a religious madrasah culture, institutional policy support, and parental involvement. Religious symbols, collective prayers, and moral reinforcement from the principal create a conducive environment for character education. A madrasah leader noted, "Character education will not succeed if teachers work alone; it must be supported by school policies and parents at home" (Principal). This confirms Aghnina's (2023) assertion that synergy among teachers, school culture, and families is essential for effective religious character formation.

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain, particularly the influence of digital media and popular culture. Some students are exposed to content inconsistent with Islamic values, leading to reduced discipline, weakened empathy, and diminished religious awareness. This finding echoes Rahman et al. (2025), who argue that digital exposure can undermine religious character without adequate Islamic digital literacy. Teachers at MI Sultan Fatah respond by providing moral guidance, strengthening digital character education, and encouraging parental supervision. Additional internal challenges include limited instructional time, diverse student religious backgrounds, and difficulties in objectively assessing affective outcomes. Teachers emphasised that character development is a long-term process that cannot be measured solely through written assessments, reinforcing Rohmah's (2019) critique of cognitively dominant evaluation practices in PAI learning.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Sultan Fatah play a strategic and effective role in shaping students' religious character through moral exemplarity, structured habituation, and contextual learning. However, this role requires sustained support from the broader educational ecosystem, including institutional policies and family involvement. The study reinforces character education theories proposed by Lickona (1991) and Bandura (1977), highlighting that character formation emerges through value integration, environmental reinforcement, and consistent role modelling. Early and sustained habituation, supported by a collaborative and adaptive educational environment, remains a key foundation for the long-term development of students' religious character in the contemporary digital era.

Table 1. The role of Islamic Religious Education teachers

Research result	Information
Teacher Exemplary Behaviour as the Foundation for Religious Character Formation	Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at MI Sultan Fatah serve as primary role models in daily worship, discipline, and morality, encouraging students to emulate these positive behaviours.
Aqidah and Akhlak Learning Based on Cognitive-Affective-Behavioral Integration	Teachers teach religious values and morals through stories, verses/hadith, moral discussions, and reflective activities, enabling students to understand, experience, and practice these values.
Structured and Consistent Religious Habits	Routine activities such as tadarus (recitation of the Koran), Dhuha prayer, Dhuhur prayer in congregation, religious sermons, and charity provide a means of strengthening students' religious character.
Contextual Learning that Connects Moral Values to Real Life	Teachers relate moral material to situations experienced by students (honesty in the cafeteria, assignments, games), using storytelling, role-playing, and discussions.
Strengthening and Inhibiting Factors: School Culture, Parental Support, and the Challenges of the Digital Age	The madrasa's religious culture and parental support strengthen character development, while exposure to digital media and limited time are challenges that must be overcome.

Based on the five research findings, it can be concluded that the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Sultan Fatah in shaping students' religious character occurs comprehensively through role models, Akidah Akhlak learning that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects, and a consistent religious habituation program within the madrasah environment. Teachers' efforts are increasingly effective because they are supported by a religious school culture and parental involvement, even though they still face the challenges of the digital era that influence student behaviour. Overall, Islamic Religious Education teachers play a strategic role as educators, mentors, and role models in shaping students' religious character, thus enabling them to internalise Islamic values contextually and sustainably within themselves.

The Impact of Islamic Religious Education Teachers' Role in Shaping Students' Religious Character at MI Sultan Fatah Through Aqidah and Akhlak Learning

In addition to the primary impacts identified earlier, this study also found that Aqidah Akhlak learning facilitated by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers positively contributed to the development of students' spiritual awareness. Teachers did not merely explain theological and moral concepts cognitively, but also encouraged students to engage in simple reflections on the meaning of worship, the purpose of life, and the importance of maintaining relationships with God and fellow human beings. This reflective process fostered students' self-awareness and empathy, which are key indicators of religious character. As one teacher explained, "We guide students to reflect on why they pray and how their actions affect others, not just how to perform religious rituals" (PAI Teacher 3). This finding supports Isnaini's (2024) assertion that Islamic Religious Education teachers play a crucial role in cultivating spiritual awareness through habitual worship and value reflection.

Another significant impact observed was the improvement of students' self-control in daily

behaviour at school. PAI teachers consistently linked moral teachings to moral consequences, emphasising emotional regulation, respectful communication, and avoidance of aggressive behaviour. Several students who were previously prone to arguments or harsh language demonstrated noticeable changes toward calmer, more polite, and more considerate behaviour. One student noted, "Now I try to control my emotions because the teacher always reminds us that good character shows our faith" (Student 6). This empirical evidence aligns with Aji et al.'s (2025) findings that moral instruction accompanied by strong teacher role modelling effectively enhances students' discipline and self-regulation.

Furthermore, Aqidah Akhlak learning strengthened students' socio-religious character, particularly values of cooperation, solidarity, and care for others. Teachers frequently connected moral lessons to practical social activities, such as helping classmates, sharing food, and assisting friends in need. These practices increased students' social sensitivity and sense of responsibility. A teacher highlighted this outcome by stating, "When students are accustomed to helping each other, moral values become part of their daily behaviour" (PAI Teacher 1). This observation supports Safitri's (2025) conclusion that integrating Islamic values with social activities significantly influences the development of students' socio-religious character.

The impact of teachers' roles was further reinforced by a madrasah environment grounded in a strong religious culture. Daily greetings, the implementation of the 5S principle (smile, greet, be polite, and be courteous), and appreciation for students who displayed commendable morals created a positive moral climate. Students demonstrated good behaviour not due to coercion, but because such conduct had become part of the madrasah's shared norms. This finding resonates with Aghnina and Lukman's (2023) study, which emphasised that a religious school culture accelerates the internalisation of moral and religious values.

Nevertheless, teachers faced ongoing challenges, particularly the negative influence of digital media. Some students tended to imitate language and behaviour encountered on social media that conflicted with Islamic moral values. A teacher acknowledged this challenge, stating, "Digital content often contradicts what we teach, so we must constantly guide students to choose wisely" (PAI Teacher 2). In response, PAI teachers at MI Sultan Fatah integrated Islamic digital literacy into their instruction by guiding students to select positive content, avoid online bullying, and use digital media responsibly. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the impact of PAI teachers extends beyond increased

Table 2. Impact of the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers

Research result	Information
Increasing students' religious awareness	The role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers is to improve students' discipline in performing Dhuha and Dhuhur prayers in congregation, reciting prayers, and reciting the Quranic verses (tadarus). These habits foster a stronger spirit of worship.
Forming more positive social morals	Student interactions demonstrate politeness, respect for teachers, mutual assistance, and foster empathy. This is a result of teachers' role models and the development of moral habits
Increasing understanding of religious and moral values	Contextual learning facilitates students' understanding of the concepts of faith and morals and their connection to everyday life situations.
Forming sustainable religious habits	Programs such as religious lectures, regular almsgiving, morning tadarus, and the practice of greetings become routines that consistently strengthen religious character.

Increasing students' moral literacy and self-control	Students are better able to distinguish between good and bad behavior, control their emotions, and avoid negative behavior even when faced with the influence of digital media.

Based on these five key findings, it can be concluded that the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Sultan Fatah significantly impacts the development of students' religious character through the teaching of Aqidah and Akhlak. The teachers' role models, habituation, and contextual approach can increase awareness of worship, foster positive social morals, strengthen understanding of the values of aqidah and morals, and establish sustainable religious routines. Furthermore, teachers play a crucial role in helping students develop moral literacy and self-control, enabling them to cope with environmental influences, including digital media. Thus, the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers not only impacts the cognitive and affective aspects but also contributes significantly to the formation of concrete religious behaviour in students' daily lives.

DISCUSSION | مناقشة

The research findings indicate that the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at MI Sultan Fatah in shaping students' religious character through Aqidah Akhlak instruction is strategic and multidimensional. Religious character formation is inseparable from teachers' roles as value educators, moral role models, and spiritual guides who interact intensively with students in daily learning activities. These findings affirm that religious character is not formed solely through the transfer of knowledge, but through continuous social and moral interaction between teachers and students.

First, teacher exemplarity emerges as the primary foundation of religious character formation. PAI teachers at MI Sultan Fatah demonstrate Islamic values through disciplined worship, respectful communication, patience, and emotional control, enabling students to learn through observation and imitation. This finding supports Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasises modelling as a key mechanism of value internalisation, particularly at the elementary level where students are still in the moral imitation stage. Second, Aqidah Akhlak learning is implemented through an integrative approach that combines cognitive understanding, affective appreciation, and behavioural practice. This approach aligns with Lickona's character education framework, which highlights the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action as essential to effective character formation.

Third, structured and consistent religious habituation plays a significant role in strengthening students' religious character. Activities such as Qur'anic recitation, congregational prayers, religious reflection, and routine charity foster discipline, spiritual awareness, and self-regulation. In addition, contextual learning approaches help students connect moral values to everyday experiences, enabling them to perceive honesty, responsibility, and empathy as practical guidelines rather than abstract ideals. The impact of PAI teachers is thus reflected not only in ritual observance but also in students' social attitudes, including increased empathy, social awareness, and emotional control.

However, this study also reveals a structural tension between the idealism of religious character education and the reality of digital media influence. While the madrasah promotes Islamic values through habituation and moral guidance, students are simultaneously exposed to digital content that may contradict these values. This condition challenges the sustainability of

value internalisation and requires PAI teachers to adopt adaptive strategies, such as strengthening Islamic digital literacy and integrating ethical discussions on digital behaviour into learning. Therefore, the findings highlight that effective religious character formation requires not only teacher exemplarity and pedagogical consistency but also institutional and parental support to address the complex moral challenges of the digital era.

CONCLUSSION | خاتمة

Based on the overall research findings, it can be concluded that the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers at MI Sultan Fatah is highly strategic and has a significant impact on shaping students' religious character through the teaching of Aqidah Akhlak (Islamic Creed and Morals). Teachers function as educators, spiritual guides, and moral role models who consistently demonstrate religious behaviour, thereby providing concrete examples for students. Through the integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioural learning, structured religious habituation programs, and contextual approaches that connect moral values to students' daily lives, learners show improvements in religious discipline, social behaviour, moral awareness, and self-control. The religious madrasah environment and parental support further strengthen the internalisation of Islamic values, although teachers continue to face challenges arising from digital media influences that affect some students' behaviour. Overall, this study confirms that the success of religious character formation depends not only on Aqidah Akhlak content but is largely determined by teacher exemplarity, consistent habituation, and collaboration between the madrasah and families in creating a supportive educational ecosystem. These findings extend the understanding that religious character formation is not the result of coercion, but rather a product of sustained habituation supported by a consistent and inclusive educational ecosystem.

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