Pedagogical Research Journal
Vol. 3 No 2. December 2025, pp. 135-139
P-ISSN: Procces E-ISSN: Process, DOI:

IMPLEMENTATION OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION LEARNING IN FORMING STUDENTS' CHARACTER AT A RURAL JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Keywords 1; Islamic Education
Keywords 2; Character Building
Keywords 3; Phenomenology
Keywords 4; School Culture

Article history:

Received 2025-12-10
Revised 2025-12-12
Accepted 2025-12-22

ABSTRACT

Character education remains a major challenge in Indonesian schools, particularly in rural contexts where social and environmental influences often conflict with institutional values. Islamic Education (*Pendidikan Agama Islam* / PAI) plays a strategic role in internalizing moral and religious values when implemented holistically. This study aims to analyze the implementation of Islamic Education learning in forming students' character at SMP Negeri 6 Bangko Pusako Satu Atap, Rokan Hilir. A qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological design was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving the principal, vice principals, an Islamic Education teacher, and students. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, supported by triangulation techniques to ensure data validity. The findings indicate that character formation through Islamic Education was implemented systematically through integrated planning, exemplary teacher behavior (*uswah hasanah*), religious habituation, and continuous evaluation of students' behavioral development. Strong school leadership and the integration of Islamic values into school culture emerged as key supporting factors, while external environmental influences and limited parental involvement constituted significant challenges. The study concludes that Islamic Education can effectively shape students' religious character when embedded within a supportive school culture and reinforced through collaboration among schools, families, and communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Character education has emerged as a critical issue in contemporary Indonesian education, particularly amid increasing concerns over moral degradation among students. Various phenomena such as declining discipline, lack of respect for teachers, weak social

responsibility, and reduced religious awareness indicate that education has not yet fully succeeded in shaping students' character holistically. These challenges are even more pronounced in rural and peripheral schools, where socio-economic limitations and environmental influences often contradict the moral values taught in schools.

Islamic Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) occupies a strategic position in addressing this challenge, as it integrates cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions through religious and moral teachings. PAI is not merely a subject aimed at transmitting religious knowledge but also serves as a medium for internalizing Islamic values that guide students' daily behavior. Values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and respect are fundamental elements of Islamic teachings that align closely with national character education goals.

Previous studies have demonstrated that Islamic Education can significantly contribute to character formation when implemented through appropriate pedagogical strategies and supported by school culture. Somad (2021) emphasized that PAI plays a vital role in developing students' moral awareness when learning activities are connected to real-life practices. Similarly, Safitri et al. (2023) found that character education through PAI becomes effective when teachers act as role models and religious habituation is consistently applied. However, several studies also highlight persistent obstacles, including limited parental involvement, inconsistent implementation, and negative external environmental influences (Fahmi & Susanto, 2018; Yusuf & Salim, 2022).

In rural school contexts, these challenges are often compounded by students' socio-cultural backgrounds and limited access to supportive educational environments. Despite these constraints, some schools demonstrate resilience by integrating Islamic Education into broader school culture through leadership commitment, structured religious programs, and collaboration among school stakeholders. Such integration ensures that character education is not confined to classroom instruction but becomes an integral part of students' daily experiences.

This study focuses on SMPN 6 Bangko Pusako Satu Atap, a rural public junior high school that consistently implements Islamic Education as the foundation of its character education program. The school represents an interesting case of how Islamic Education can be strategically utilized to shape students' character despite environmental limitations. Therefore, this study aims to explore in depth the planning, implementation, and evaluation of Islamic Education learning in forming students' character, as well as to identify supporting and inhibiting factors influencing the process.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences of participants regarding the implementation of Islamic Education in character formation. The research was conducted at SMPN 6 Bangko Pusako Satu Atap, Rokan Hilir, from September to November 2025.

The research subjects consisted of ten informants selected through purposive sampling, including the principal, vice principal for curriculum, vice principal for student affairs, one Islamic Education teacher, and six students. Data were collected using triangulation techniques, namely in-depth interviews, direct observation of learning activities and religious programs, and documentation analysis of curriculum documents, lesson plans, and school activity reports.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, and member checking.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 FINDING

3.1.1 Implementation of Islamic Education Learning in Character Formation

The findings reveal that Islamic Education learning at SMPN 6 Bangko Pusako Satu Atap was implemented systematically through three interconnected stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. These stages formed a continuous cycle that reinforced character values in both formal and informal school activities.

At the planning stage, Islamic Education was positioned as a core element of the school's educational philosophy. Character values were explicitly embedded in lesson plans (RPP), school regulations, and extracurricular religious activities. The principal played a pivotal role in ensuring that character education objectives were consistently translated into instructional practices. This finding aligns with Nurmalasari et al. (2024), who emphasized that strong leadership commitment is a determining factor in the successful integration of character education.

During the implementation stage, character formation was realized through exemplary behavior (uswah hasanah) and religious habituation. Teachers consistently demonstrated discipline, politeness, and religious commitment, thereby functioning as moral role models for students. Daily activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and short religious reflections were not treated as ceremonial routines but as meaningful practices aimed at shaping students' habits and moral awareness. Students reported gradual behavioral changes, particularly in discipline, responsibility, and religious observance.

Evaluation was conducted continuously and holistically, focusing not only on students' cognitive understanding of religious concepts but also on observable behavioral changes. Teachers monitored students' participation in religious activities, adherence to school rules, and interpersonal behavior. This form of evaluation reflects a comprehensive understanding of character education as a long-term developmental process rather than an outcome measured solely through academic tests.

3.1.2 Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Several supporting factors contributed to the effective implementation of Islamic Education. Strong leadership commitment ensured program consistency, while collaboration among teachers reinforced shared values across subjects. Furthermore, the synergy of the Tri-Center of Education—school, family, and community—played an important role, particularly when parents actively supported religious practices at home.

Nevertheless, the study identified significant inhibiting factors. External environmental influences, such as peer groups and community norms that contradicted school values, posed major challenges to character internalization. Students' physical fatigue due to domestic responsibilities and limited parental supervision further affected their motivation and engagement. These findings echo Yusuf and Salim (2022), who found that weak parental involvement often undermines school-based character education efforts.

3.2 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the role of Islamic Education in shaping students' character within a rural school context. The results confirm that character education through Islamic Education is most effective when implemented holistically, integrating curriculum, school culture, leadership, and daily

practices. This supports the theoretical perspective that character formation is not a linear instructional outcome but a continuous social and moral process embedded in students' lived experiences.

Consistent with Somad (2021) and Safitri et al. (2023), this study demonstrates that exemplary teacher behavior (*uswah hasanah*) and religious habituation are central mechanisms in character internalization. Teachers who consistently model discipline, honesty, and religious commitment create a moral environment that enables students to observe, imitate, and gradually internalize desired values. However, this study extends previous findings by emphasizing that exemplary behavior must be institutionally supported through school leadership and policy to ensure sustainability.

In contrast to Fahmi and Susanto (2018), who reported fragmented and inconsistent implementation of character education due to weak institutional commitment, this research reveals that strong leadership plays a decisive role in maintaining program coherence. At SMPN 6 Bangko Pusako Satu Atap, the principal's commitment ensured that Islamic values were not confined to the PAI classroom but embedded across school activities and regulations. This finding reinforces leadership theories that position school leaders as moral architects who shape organizational culture and value orientation.

Furthermore, while many previous studies focused predominantly on classroom-based learning, this research highlights the importance of school culture as a medium for character formation. Daily religious routines, collective worship, and moral reminders functioned as informal yet powerful educational tools. This finding aligns with Sendika et al. (2024), who argue that religious school culture strengthens the affective dimension of learning and enhances value internalization beyond cognitive understanding.

Another significant contribution of this study lies in its exploration of contextual challenges in rural education. External environmental influences and limited parental involvement were identified as major barriers to character development. These findings are consistent with Yusuf and Salim (2022), who emphasized the crucial role of family support in sustaining school-based character education. However, this study adds nuance by illustrating how schools can partially compensate for weak external support through structured internal programs and consistent moral reinforcement.

From a phenomenological perspective, students' experiences revealed that character formation occurred gradually through repeated exposure to values in daily activities rather than through direct moral instruction alone. This supports constructivist views of moral education, which emphasize experiential learning and social interaction as key mechanisms in value formation. The findings suggest that character education programs should prioritize consistency, authenticity, and contextual relevance rather than relying solely on formal instruction.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence from a rural Indonesian school context, demonstrating that Islamic Education can serve as an effective foundation for character education when supported by leadership, integrated school culture, and collaborative efforts. It also highlights the need for systemic approaches that bridge school, family, and community environments to ensure the sustainability of character development outcomes.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the implementation of Islamic Education learning in forming students' character at SMPN 6 Bangko Pusako Satu Atap has been carried out comprehensively and systematically. Character formation was achieved through the integration of Islamic values into curriculum planning, instructional practices, and school culture, supported by exemplary teacher behavior and continuous religious habituation.

The findings indicate that Islamic Education can serve as an effective foundation for character education, particularly when supported by strong leadership commitment and collaboration among school stakeholders. Despite facing challenges such as negative environmental influences and limited parental involvement, the school demonstrated resilience in sustaining its character education programs.

This study implies that character education through Islamic Education should be designed as a holistic and long-term process involving not only schools but also families and communities. Future research is recommended to explore collaborative intervention models that strengthen parental and community engagement, as well as comparative studies across different rural and urban school contexts to enhance the generalizability of findings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the principal, teachers, and students of SMP Negeri 6 Bangko Pusako Satu Atap for their cooperation and support during the research process. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and academic supervisors who provided constructive feedback and administrative assistance that contributed to the completion of this study.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The research was conducted independently without any personal, financial, or institutional relationships that could influence the interpretation or presentation of the findings.

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