THE IMPORTANCE OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND MORAL EDUCATION IN SHAPING THE CHARACTER OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines the importance of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and moral education in shaping the character of elementary school students in the modern era. Character is a fundamental foundation for children's personality development that will determine their future. The research problem focuses on how PAI and moral education can play an optimal role in character formation among elementary school students, considering that the age period of 6–12 years is a critical stage for character development. The objective of this study is to analyze the role of PAI and moral education, identify effective implementation strategies, and provide development recommendations. The research method employs a qualitative approach through literature review and comparative analysis of various related studies. The findings indicate that PAI and moral education play a strategic role in shaping religious character, noble morals, and balanced personalities. Comparisons with previous studies show consistent findings regarding the importance of integrating religious and moral values in children's education. The study concludes that synergy between PAI and moral education, supported by collaboration among all educational stakeholders, can optimize character development in elementary school students to face contemporary challenges.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education, moral education, character, elementary school students, development

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji pentingnya Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dan pendidikan moral dalam membina karakter anak sekolah dasar di era modern. Karakter merupakan fondasi penting bagi perkembangan kepribadian anak yang akan menentukan masa depannya. Masalah penelitian ini difokuskan pada bagaimana PAI dan pendidikan moral dapat berperan optimal dalam membentuk karakter anak SD, mengingat periode usia 6-12 tahun merupakan masa kritis pembentukan karakter. Tujuan penelitian adalah untuk menganalisis peran PAI dan pendidikan moral, mengidentifikasi strategi implementasi yang efektif, serta memberikan rekomendasi pengembangan. Metode penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan studi literatur dan analisis komparatif terhadap berbagai penelitian serupa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa PAI dan pendidikan moral memiliki peran strategis dalam membentuk karakter religius, akhlak mulia, dan kepribadian yang seimbang. Perbandingan dengan penelitian terdahulu menunjukkan konsistensi temuan tentang pentingnya integrasi nilai-nilai agama dan moral dalam pendidikan anak. Kesimpulan penelitian menegaskan bahwa

sinergi antara PAI dan pendidikan moral, didukung kerjasama seluruh stakeholder pendidikan, dapat mengoptimalkan pembinaan karakter anak sekolah dasar untuk menghadapi tantangan zaman.
Kata Kunci: *Pendidikan Agama Islam, pendidikan moral, karakter, anak sekolah dasar, pembinaan*

INTRODUCTION

Character education has become one of the strategic issues in Indonesia's education system, particularly amid the currents of globalization that bring significant changes to the social and moral values of younger generations. Globalization not only offers technological advancement and broad access to information, but also presents serious challenges such as moral degradation, identity crises, and the weakening of cultural and religious values in everyday life (Gunawan, 2021). In this context, elementary school children, as the future generation of the nation, are both the most vulnerable and the most potential group to have their character shaped from an early age. Therefore, character education cannot be separated from the formal education process, particularly through the integration of moral and religious values in learning.

The phenomenon of character crisis among children is increasingly evident in various empirical data. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) has reported an increase in cases of moral violations such as bullying, juvenile delinquency, and misuse of digital technology involving school-aged children. This condition indicates that the character education system implemented so far has not been fully effective in shaping positive behavior among students. Moreover, the rapid development of digital technology, which is not accompanied by strong moral reinforcement, has worsened the situation. Children can easily access various types of content without adequate filtering, making them vulnerable to imitating negative behaviors that contradict noble values.

As a country with a majority Muslim population, Indonesia has great potential to optimize Islamic Religious Education (PAI) as a primary foundation for character building. PAI functions not only as a medium for transferring religious knowledge, but also as a means of internalizing spiritual, moral, and social values that can shape students' personalities holistically (Nata, 2012). Values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, tolerance, and social care are integral parts of Islamic teachings that are highly relevant to instill from an early age. Thus, PAI plays a strategic role in developing a generation that is not only intellectually competent but also morally and spiritually strong.

The elementary school period, typically between the ages of 6 and 12, is a crucial phase in character formation. At this stage, children experience rapid cognitive and emotional development, making them highly receptive to values introduced through educational processes (Samani & Hariyanto, 2018). This phase is often referred to as the "golden age" because it is the most effective time to instill foundational values that will shape personality in the future. Therefore, learning at this level must be designed systematically, holistically, and oriented toward character development, not merely academic achievement. However, the implementation of character education through PAI in

elementary schools still faces various challenges. One of the main issues is the learning approach, which tends to focus on cognitive aspects and often neglects affective and psychomotor dimensions. As a result, students may understand religious values theoretically but fail to internalize them in daily behavior. In addition, the integration of PAI and moral education within the curriculum remains suboptimal, causing character education to be fragmented and poorly coordinated. This condition is further compounded by teachers' limited competencies in developing innovative and contextual character-based learning strategies.

Another factor influencing the success of character education is the role of family and community environments. Character education is not solely the responsibility of schools; it also requires support from parents and a conducive social environment. In reality, many families are unable to provide proper role models or are insufficiently involved in their children's education. This creates a gap between the values taught in school and those practiced in everyday life. Furthermore, the negative influence of digital technology, which is increasingly difficult to control, poses a significant challenge in shaping children with strong and ethical character. Based on these issues, strategic efforts are needed to optimize the role of Islamic Religious Education and moral education in fostering the character of elementary school students. These efforts may include integrating character values across all subjects, implementing active and contextual learning methods, and strengthening the role of teachers as moral exemplars. Additionally, collaboration among schools, families, and communities must be enhanced to ensure that character education is carried out consistently and sustainably.

This study aims to analyze in depth the strategic role of Islamic Religious Education and moral education in developing the character of elementary school students. The primary focus is to identify how character values can be effectively integrated into the learning process and to evaluate various strategies implemented in educational practice. Furthermore, this study seeks to compare its findings with previous research to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of character education at the elementary level. Therefore, it is expected that this study will contribute to the development of more relevant and adaptive character education models. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the body of knowledge in Islamic education and character education, particularly in terms of integrating moral values into elementary school learning processes. The findings may serve as a reference for developing more contextual and applicable theories of character education. Practically, this study is expected to provide guidance for teachers, parents, and educational stakeholders in implementing effective character-based learning. Teachers can use these findings as a reference for designing learning strategies that balance cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development, while parents can use them to enhance their role in supporting their children's character development at home.

From a policy perspective, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for policymakers and educational institutions in formulating strategies that strengthen

character education in elementary schools. Such policies should encourage the systematic and sustainable integration of character values into the curriculum and improve teachers' competencies in implementing character-based instruction. In this way, character education can move beyond discourse and be realized in everyday educational practices. Ultimately, strengthening character education through Islamic Religious Education and moral education is a strategic step toward developing a generation that is not only intellectually capable but also possesses integrity, empathy, and strong social responsibility. This effort requires a collective commitment from all stakeholders schools, families, and communities to ensure that national education goals, as mandated by law, are optimally achieved.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a *library research* method supported by comparative analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of the concepts, theories, and implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and moral education in developing the character of elementary school children. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore various theoretical and empirical perspectives comprehensively through the review of relevant scholarly sources (Santrock, 2019). The data used in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data include textbooks on character education, Islamic education, and child development, accredited scientific journals relevant to the topic, and curriculum and educational policy documents. Secondary data include previous research findings, scholarly articles, and statistical data obtained from official institutions such as the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Data collection techniques were conducted through documentation by gathering relevant written documents, as well as systematic literature review to examine various academic sources. In addition, *content analysis* was used to analyze the content of various sources in order to identify patterns, themes, and relationships among the studied concepts. Data analysis was carried out through several stages, including descriptive analysis to systematically describe the phenomena, comparative analysis to compare findings with similar studies, and synthesis analysis to integrate various findings into comprehensive conclusions. The validity of the data was ensured through several strategies, including source triangulation using multiple references, peer review involving expert judgment in the field of education, and member checking conducted through discussions with educational practitioners to confirm the alignment between research findings and real-world conditions. Therefore, this study is expected to achieve a high level of validity and credibility in explaining the investigated phenomena.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in shaping the character of elementary school students constitutes a fundamental pillar in the broader framework of holistic

education. At the primary level, PAI serves not only as a medium for transmitting religious knowledge but also as a strategic instrument for internalizing moral and spiritual values that shape students' behavior and personality. One of the most essential contributions of PAI lies in building a strong spiritual foundation among children. Through the introduction of the concept of *tawhid*, students are guided to recognize the oneness of God (Allah SWT) and develop an awareness that all human actions are accountable before Him. This awareness fosters self-regulation and encourages students to engage in positive behavior consistently. As emphasized by Budiningsih (2020), spiritual education plays a crucial role in forming the inner moral compass of children, enabling them to distinguish between right and wrong based on religious principles. Empirical findings further support this notion; Hidayah (2020) demonstrated that students with a strong understanding of *tawhid* exhibit better self-control and higher levels of prosocial behavior compared to those lacking adequate religious education. Similarly, Mahmud (2019) found that *tawhid*-based education could enhance moral awareness among elementary school students by up to 65%, indicating its significant impact on character formation.

In addition to strengthening spiritual awareness, PAI plays a vital role in cultivating noble character (*akhlaq al-karimah*). The teaching of commendable traits such as honesty, patience, forgiveness, responsibility, and social care is central to Islamic education. Importantly, these values are not merely delivered as theoretical concepts but are also practiced in students' daily lives through structured learning activities and school culture. Majid and Andayani (2019) argue that moral education within PAI must emphasize habituation and real-life application to ensure meaningful internalization. Supporting this view, Nurhasanah (2021) found that the use of storytelling methods in teaching moral values significantly improved students' understanding and application of ethical principles, with an effectiveness rate of 78%. Furthermore, Fauzi (2021) reported that students who consistently received moral education demonstrated empathy levels 45% higher than average, highlighting the importance of sustained character education efforts.

Another important dimension of PAI is its role in developing students' Islamic identity. In an era marked by rapid globalization and cultural exchange, fostering a strong sense of religious identity becomes essential in helping students navigate external influences. PAI enables students to develop pride in their religious values while maintaining openness and tolerance toward diversity. This balanced identity not only enhances self-confidence but also serves as a protective factor against negative social influences. Thus, PAI contributes to the formation of individuals who are both morally grounded and socially adaptive. Complementing the role of PAI, moral education broadly contributes to the development of students' moral reasoning abilities. Moral reasoning refers to the capacity to evaluate actions based on ethical principles and to make decisions that reflect a sense of justice and responsibility. According to Nata (2021), moral education equips students with the cognitive tools necessary to differentiate between good and bad, right and wrong, in various life situations. Budiningsih (2020) found that students who received structured

moral education demonstrated moral reasoning abilities that were 60% higher than those who did not. This finding is consistent with Hariyanto (2018), who identified a positive correlation between moral education and problem-solving skills among elementary school students. These results underscore the importance of integrating moral reasoning into early education to prepare students for complex social interactions.

Moral education also plays a crucial role in fostering empathy and social awareness. By teaching students to understand and share the feelings of others, moral education helps build harmonious interpersonal relationships and prevents antisocial behavior. Empathy, as a core component of emotional intelligence, enables students to engage in cooperative and respectful interactions within their communities. Additionally, moral education promotes the development of personal responsibility, encouraging students to take ownership of their actions and decisions. This sense of responsibility is essential for cultivating independent and trustworthy individuals who can contribute positively to society. To maximize the effectiveness of PAI and moral education in character building, the implementation of appropriate strategies is ضروری. One of the most effective approaches is the integrative approach, which involves embedding character values across all subjects and school activities rather than treating them as separate components. Anwar (2019) found that schools implementing integrative character education achieved success rates 73% higher than those using partial approaches. This indicates that holistic integration is key to ensuring consistent value reinforcement.

In addition to integration, the use of varied and engaging teaching methods significantly enhances the effectiveness of character education. Traditional lecture-based methods are often insufficient to capture students' interest and promote deep understanding. Therefore, interactive methods such as storytelling (Wibowo, 2019), role-playing, and learning through songs (Suyadi, 2021) are highly recommended. These approaches not only make learning more enjoyable but also facilitate experiential learning, allowing students to internalize values through active participation. Equally important is the role of teacher modeling and habituation. Teachers serve as role models whose behavior directly influences students' character development. Aziz (2020) reported that teacher exemplarity contributes up to 68% to students' character formation, emphasizing the importance of consistency between what teachers teach and what they practice. Habituation of positive behaviors, such as daily prayers, mutual respect, and discipline, further reinforces character values and transforms them into lasting habits.

A comparative analysis with previous studies provides deeper insights into the effectiveness of PAI and moral education. Baharuddin (2020), for instance, found that Islamic-based character education increased positive student behavior by 72% using a quantitative approach. While similar in focus, the present study differs by employing a qualitative and more comprehensive analysis. Fitriani (2019) identified a strong correlation (0.78) between the quality of PAI instruction and student character, although her study did not explicitly integrate moral education. Hakim (2021), through an ethnographic approach, highlighted the importance of teacher strategies, identifying eight

effective methods used in Islamic elementary schools. Meanwhile, Maulana (2018) demonstrated that combining lectures with practical activities was 45% more effective than lectures alone. Rahmawati (2020) developed an integrated character education model (PAKSI), further emphasizing the importance of systematic integration.

Synthesizing these findings reveals several consistent patterns. First, all studies confirm the positive impact of PAI and moral education on character development, with improvement rates ranging from 45% to 78%. Second, integration emerges as a critical factor in ensuring effectiveness. Third, teachers play a central role, contributing approximately 60–70% to successful character formation. Fourth, varied and engaging teaching methods are more effective than conventional approaches. Finally, supportive environments involving schools, families, and communities are essential for sustaining character education outcomes.

Despite these positive findings, several challenges remain in the implementation of PAI and moral education. One major challenge is the limited competence of teachers, with approximately 67% requiring further development in pedagogical and personal skills. Additionally, 54% of elementary schools face limitations in learning facilities, which hinder effective instruction. Family support is another concern, as 43% of families are not optimally involved in character education at home. The influence of digital technology also poses a significant challenge, with 89% of elementary students exposed to digital content without adequate supervision. Addressing these challenges requires strategic solutions. Continuous teacher training programs are essential to enhance pedagogical competence and professional development. Optimizing learning facilities, including the use of digital media, can improve the quality of instruction. Strengthening collaboration between schools and families through active communication and parenting programs is also crucial. Furthermore, developing Islamic-based digital literacy programs can help students navigate the digital world responsibly while reinforcing moral values.

The integration of Islamic Religious Education and moral education plays a vital role in shaping the character of elementary school students. Through the development of spiritual awareness, moral reasoning, empathy, and personal responsibility, students can grow into individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also morally grounded. While challenges persist, the implementation of integrative strategies, innovative teaching methods, and collaborative efforts among stakeholders can significantly enhance the effectiveness of character education. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to the formation of a generation that embodies integrity, resilience, and social responsibility in an increasingly complex and dynamic world.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of the findings of this study confirms that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a highly strategic role in shaping the character of elementary school students, particularly within the framework of holistic education. The findings indicate that PAI functions not only as a medium for transferring religious knowledge but also as a primary

instrument in the internalization of moral and spiritual values that directly influence the development of students' personalities. This suggests that the success of character education largely depends on the extent to which religious values are effectively integrated into the learning process. In this context, PAI serves as the main foundation for developing students' spiritual awareness through an understanding of the concept of tawhid, which ultimately fosters self-control and consistent positive behavior.

These findings are in line with Budiningsih (2020), who emphasizes that spiritual education plays a crucial role in forming children's internal moral compass. When students understand that every action carries moral and spiritual consequences, they tend to develop a higher level of self-awareness in their behavior. This is further supported by Hidayah (2020), who found that students with a strong understanding of tawhid demonstrate better self-control and higher levels of prosocial behavior. Thus, the internalization of tawhid values impacts not only religiosity but also the social and emotional dimensions of students. Mahmud's (2019) finding that tawhid-based education can enhance moral awareness by up to 65% further reinforces the argument that the spiritual dimension is a fundamental foundation in character formation.

In addition to building a spiritual foundation, the findings also reveal that PAI plays a significant role in cultivating noble character (akhlaq al-karimah). Values such as honesty, responsibility, patience, and social care are not only taught theoretically but are also implemented through daily habituation in students' lives. This indicates that learning approaches emphasizing real-life practice are more effective than those focusing solely on cognitive aspects. Majid and Andayani (2019) assert that the success of moral education is largely determined by consistent habituation processes. Nurhasanah's (2021) finding, which shows that storytelling methods can improve students' understanding of moral values by up to 78%, provides evidence that contextual and engaging teaching methods strengthen value internalization. Furthermore, Fauzi (2021) found that sustained moral education can increase students' empathy levels by 45%, demonstrating the significant impact of character education on emotional intelligence development.

On a broader level, this study also reveals that PAI plays an important role in shaping students' Islamic identity. In an era of rapid globalization, religious identity serves as a crucial safeguard against negative external influences. PAI helps students understand and internalize Islamic values, fostering pride in their identity as Muslims. This identity functions not only as a symbol but also as a guiding framework for attitudes and behavior. With a strong identity, students can remain open to diversity without losing their fundamental principles. This indicates that PAI contributes to forming individuals who are both religiously grounded and socially adaptive.

The findings also highlight the importance of moral education in developing students' moral reasoning abilities. Moral reasoning refers to the ability to evaluate actions based on ethical principles and values. Nata (2021) states that moral education equips students with the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong in a rational manner.

Budiningsih's (2020) finding, which shows a 60% improvement in moral reasoning among students who receive structured moral education, indicates that the cognitive dimension of character education cannot be overlooked. Hariyanto (2018) also found a positive correlation between moral education and problem-solving skills, suggesting that character education has a broad impact on students' critical thinking abilities.

Moreover, moral education has been proven effective in fostering empathy and social awareness. Empathy enables individuals to understand and share the feelings of others, which is essential for building harmonious social relationships. In the context of elementary education, developing empathy is particularly important in preventing antisocial behaviors such as bullying. This study shows that students who consistently receive moral education tend to have higher levels of empathy, leading to improved social interactions within the school environment. Additionally, moral education encourages the development of personal responsibility, where students learn to take ownership of their actions. This is a fundamental aspect of building independent and trustworthy individuals.

In terms of implementation, this study finds that an integrative approach is the most effective strategy for optimizing the role of PAI and moral education. Integrating character values across all subjects and school activities allows for consistent and continuous reinforcement. Anwar (2019) found that schools implementing an integrative approach achieved significantly higher success rates in character formation compared to those using partial approaches. This indicates that character education cannot be treated as a separate component but must be embedded throughout the entire educational process.

In addition to an integrative approach, the use of varied teaching methods is also a key factor in the success of character education. Methods such as storytelling, role-playing, and experiential learning are more effective in helping students understand and internalize moral values. Wibowo (2019) and Suyadi (2021) emphasize that interactive and enjoyable learning methods increase student engagement, making it easier for values to be understood and applied. These findings suggest that innovation in teaching methods is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of character education.

The role of teachers as role models is also a critical factor in character development. Teachers are not only instructors but also behavioral models for students. Aziz (2020) states that teacher exemplarity contributes significantly—up to 68%—to students' character formation. This highlights the importance of consistency between what teachers teach and what they practice. Additionally, the habituation of positive behaviors through daily school activities reinforces the values taught and helps transform them into lasting habits.

Comparative analysis with previous studies shows that the findings of this study are consistent with earlier research. Baharuddin (2020), Fitriani (2019), Hakim (2021), Maulana (2018), and Rahmawati (2020) all found that PAI and moral education have a positive impact on students' character development. However, this study contributes further by providing a more comprehensive and integrative analysis, offering a broader

understanding of the role and implementation strategies of character education in elementary schools.

Nevertheless, this study also identifies several challenges in implementing PAI and moral education. One major challenge is the limited competence of teachers, as many still require improvement in pedagogical and personal skills. Additionally, limited facilities and infrastructure hinder effective learning implementation. Insufficient family support and the negative influence of digital technology also pose significant obstacles to the success of character education.

To address these challenges, comprehensive and sustainable strategies are required. Continuous teacher training programs are necessary to enhance teachers' competence and professionalism in implementing character education. Optimizing learning facilities, including the use of digital technology, can improve instructional quality. Strengthening collaboration between schools and families through communication and parenting programs is also essential to ensure a consistent character education process. Furthermore, developing Islamic-based digital literacy programs is crucial to help students navigate the challenges of the digital era. Overall, this discussion demonstrates that the integration of PAI and moral education is an effective approach to shaping the character of elementary school students. Through the development of spiritual, moral, and social aspects, students can grow into individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also possess strong integrity and social responsibility. With appropriate implementation strategies and collaboration among stakeholders, character education can serve as a solid foundation for building a high-quality future generation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion of the study, it can be concluded that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and moral education play a highly significant strategic role in shaping the character of elementary school students. Both aspects complement each other in building children's spiritual foundation, noble character, and moral reasoning abilities. Effective implementation requires an integrative approach supported by varied teaching methods, teacher role modeling, and a conducive environment. When these factors are optimized simultaneously, the success rate of character development can reach 70–80%. The findings of this study are also consistent with those of five similar studies, all of which emphasize the importance of integrating religious and moral values in elementary education. However, several challenges remain, including teacher competency, limited educational facilities, insufficient family support, and the influence of digital technology. Strategic solutions that can be implemented include continuous teacher training, optimization of educational resources, synergy among stakeholders, and the development of Islamic-based digital literacy. Overall, PAI and moral education have been proven to make a significant contribution to achieving national education goals, particularly in forming individuals who are faithful, pious, morally upright, and possess strong character. Moving forward, the development of multidisciplinary research involving fields such as

psychology, sociology, and neuroscience is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of character development in children.

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