

Contextual Character Education through PAI Learning: A Pesantren-Based Strategy in Islamic Vocational School

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Abstract

This study explores the contextual strategies of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in character development at SMK Darut Taqwa, a pesantren-based Islamic vocational school in Pasuruan, Indonesia. Grounded in the challenges of moral decline and the digital culture's negative impact on youth, this research seeks to examine how worship habituation, teacher role modeling, and school-family collaboration contribute to sustainable Islamic character education. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving school leaders, guidance counselors, and PAI teachers.

Findings reveal that daily practices such as congregational prayer, Qur'an recitation, and structured moral routines foster discipline, empathy, and social responsibility among students. Teachers' exemplary conduct, including patience, fairness, and punctuality, serves as a critical pedagogical model. Moreover, the involvement of parents in religious and educational activities strengthens value internalization beyond school settings. However, external factors such as social media influence and limited parental control present significant challenges.

This study contributes to the discourse on Islamic education by proposing a pesantren-based character formation strategy that integrates local religious values with sustainable moral education. The findings offer practical implications for Islamic educators in designing holistic and culturally grounded character education models.

Keywords: Islamic Character Education; PAI Learning Strategy; Pesantren; Sustainability; Local Religious Wisdom

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology and the intensifying currents of globalization have brought complex implications for education, particularly in shaping the character of the younger generation. The widespread use of social media, the dominance of instant popular culture, and the declining intensity of meaningful social interactions among adolescents have raised serious concerns about a character crisis. This phenomenon is marked by weakened social awareness, low commitment to religious practices, and a rise in consumerist and individualistic behaviors in school settings (Herawati et al., 2025; Ummah, 2023). These challenges compel Islamic education not only to transmit religious knowledge cognitively but also to actively cultivate holistic personalities grounded in moral integrity.



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Islamic Religious Education (PAI) has long served as a central component in character education across various educational levels. However, several studies indicate that the prevailing approach in PAI instruction tends to be normative, textual, and insufficiently applicable to students' everyday lives (Aufa et al., 2023; Rahmadani, 2024). Teaching strategies that rely heavily on lectures and memorization fail to foster deep character development, as they do not adequately engage affective and psychomotor dimensions. In this context, PAI teachers face the challenge of not merely delivering content but also embodying exemplary conduct and facilitating the internalization of Islamic values in students' daily routines.

Various studies have underscored the effectiveness of worship-based practices, teacher role modeling, and habitual reinforcement of Islamic values as more impactful strategies for character building (Judrah et al., 2024; Nurmilah & Irfani, 2024). Moreover, collaboration between schools and families has been identified as a crucial supporting factor in reinforcing the internalization of character values (Anisah, 2023; Yaşaroğlu, 2016). Nevertheless, most existing research has concentrated on primary or lower secondary schools, with relatively little attention given to Islamic vocational schools (SMK), which face unique challenges due to their heterogeneous student populations and vocational orientation.

Meanwhile, pesantren institutions have long been recognized for their systematic success in instilling character values through habitual practices, exemplary leadership, and religious reinforcement. Traditions such as congregational prayer, Qur'anic recitation, communal remembrance (dzikir), and close interaction between students (santri) and religious mentors (kiai) have proven effective in shaping disciplined and devout personalities (Arifin, n.d.; Muttaqin et al., 2024; Zamhari, 2010). However, the unique values of pesantren remain underexplored in the context of their integration into Islamic vocational schools, particularly as systematic and contextual strategies within PAI instruction.

In this light, it is crucial to explore how pesantren-based character education approaches can be adopted and implemented in Islamic vocational schools. This is especially relevant considering that SMK students require not only vocational skills but also strong character foundations to navigate modern ethical challenges and workplace demands. As (Mulyana et al., 2019) note, teacher exemplarity and value habituation significantly influence behavioral transformation among students, yet such practices are often implemented inconsistently and lack sustainable evaluation frameworks.

Unfortunately, empirical studies that specifically investigate the integration of pesantren values into PAI teaching strategies at vocational schools are still scarce. In several cases, Islamic vocational schools are founded upon strong pesantren traditions, yet lack contextualized and structured models for character education. This constitutes the research gap that this study aims to address.

Based on the aforementioned context, this study seeks to examine the instructional strategies of PAI teachers in character formation at SMK Darut Taqwa, Pasuruan—an Islamic vocational school rooted in pesantren tradition. The study focuses on the practice of worship

habituation, teacher role modeling, and school-parent collaboration as foundational pillars of character development. It also evaluates the challenges encountered in the implementation process and assesses the effectiveness of the character evaluation mechanisms. Accordingly, this research aspires to contribute theoretically to the development of Islamic character education models rooted in local wisdom and oriented toward sustainability, while also offering practical strategies that can be replicated in other Islamic educational settings.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design. This approach was selected because it enables the researcher to explore in depth the processes, strategies, and dynamics of character formation implemented within a specific context—namely, SMK Darut Taqwa Pasuruan, an Islamic vocational school based in a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) tradition. The case study method is considered relevant for exploring complex phenomena contextually and for understanding their meanings from the perspective of educational practitioners (Akbar et al., 2023; Denzin & Giardina, 2022). The research site was purposively selected—SMK Darut Taqwa—due to its strong integration of formal education and pesantren traditions. The school's vision, which emphasizes producing graduates who are morally upright (*akhlakul karimah*), skilled, and independent, makes it a contextual setting for investigating Islamic Religious Education (IRE) strategies in shaping students' Islamic character sustainably. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, based on the consideration that they possess relevant knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in character education strategies at the school. The key informants included one principal, one vice principal for student affairs, and two guidance and counseling teachers who also serve as IRE teachers. In total, four informants contributed insights from managerial, pedagogical, and psychosocial perspectives. Data collection was conducted using three primary techniques: (1) participant observation of classroom instruction and religious activities at the school; (2) semi-structured interviews with the informants to explore strategies, practices, and challenges in character formation; and (3) document analysis of school records, such as curricula, lesson plans, student worship activity logs, and meeting minutes between school and parents. All data were collected over the period of February to April 2025, with intensive field visits that enabled comprehensive triangulation of sources and methods. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis through steps of data reduction, categorization, and interpretation. This process was carried out iteratively, comparing interview findings with observations and documentation to identify patterns in instructional strategies contributing to character development. To ensure data validity, the study employed triangulation of sources and methods, and referred to the four criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Anney, 2014; Haq et al., 2023). Credibility was ensured through cross-checking among informants and member checking; transferability was achieved by providing detailed contextual descriptions; dependability was supported by systematic documentation of the

research process; and confirmability was established through audit trails and critical reflection on the researcher's positionality. Through this methodology, the study aims to generate in-depth, trustworthy findings that contribute significantly to the development of contextual Islamic Religious Education strategies focused on sustainable Islamic character formation.

Result and Discussion

Result

To provide a systematic overview of the findings, the data obtained in this study were classified into six major thematic categories reflecting the study's focus: (1) implementation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies, (2) the role of teachers as role models, (3) collaboration between school and parents, (4) the effectiveness of these strategies in changing students' character, (5) the challenges encountered in character formation, and (6) the evaluation mechanisms employed. Each theme is further elaborated through sub-themes to reflect the richness of the data gathered from observations, interviews, and document analysis. The following table presents a thematic synthesis of the main findings, including descriptions and data sources.

Table 1. Thematic Synthesis of Research Findings on PAI Learning Strategies in Character Formation

Theme / Sub-theme	Key Findings	Data Source
Implementation of PAI Learning Strategies		
Worship habituation and active learning	Students became accustomed to performing congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation (<i>tadarus</i>), and maintaining discipline during learning activities. A PAI teacher remarked, "Religious activities are the initial routine so that students are spiritually prepared and become disciplined." (PAI Teacher, 15-2-2025)	Observation of prayer and classroom activities
Questioning habit at the beginning of lessons	The habit of asking questions increased student focus and encouraged critical thinking. A teacher stated, "I train students to ask questions before the lesson begins so they not only listen but also think." (PAI Teacher 1, 15-2-2025)	Interview with teacher (M. Tholib, M.Pd.)
Teachers as Role Models		
• Exemplary conduct in worship and social ethics	Teachers demonstrated consistent prayer behavior, polite communication, and positive social conduct. A student expressed, "I saw my teacher always calm and patient, even when we made mistakes. It made me feel	Teacher interviews and student observations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Differentiated approach to students 	<p>guilty for not being serious.” (Student, Grade XI, 17-2025)</p> <p>Teachers adjusted their methods according to students’ diverse backgrounds. One guidance teacher explained, “Our students come from different backgrounds. If one approach doesn’t work, I change it so it stays relevant.” (BK Teacher, 18-2-2025)</p>	<p>Interviews with teachers and homeroom educators</p>
<p>School-Parent Collaboration</p>	<p>Communication through forums and digital platforms</p>	<p>Meeting documentation and WhatsApp class groups</p>
<p>Parental involvement in religious activities</p>	<p>Formal meetings and online communication helped monitor student behavior. A teacher explained, “We have WhatsApp groups with parents. Sometimes we send photos of students performing <i>dhuhra</i> prayer or joining social events so they can track their children’s progress.” (PAI Teacher 2, 18-2-2025)</p>	<p>Observation of activities and parent interviews</p>
<p>Effectiveness of Strategies on Student Character</p>	<p>Parents were invited to participate in religious and social school activities. A parent noted, “We’re invited to attend events like Maulid, so we can understand our children’s activities and help guide them.” (Parent, 20-2-2025)</p>	<p>Attendance records and student activity comparisons</p>
<p>Improved discipline and confidence to ask questions</p>	<p>Students demonstrated better discipline, increased participation, and greater confidence in class. A parent shared, “My child now prays regularly and helps at home. He didn’t do that before.” (Parent, 20-2-2025)</p>	<p>Attendance records and student activity comparisons</p>
<p>Change in social attitudes and empathy</p>	<p>Students showed increased empathy and concern for others. One student noted, “When a friend falls or is in trouble, we usually help together.” (Student, Grade X, 16-2-2025)</p>	<p>Student interviews and activity documentation</p>
<p>Challenges in Character Formation</p>	<p>Negative influence of social media</p>	<p>Teacher interviews and Ummah (2023)</p>
<p>Inconsistency among teachers</p>	<p>Social media promotes values that conflict with Islamic moral teachings. A teacher noted, “They memorize TikTok content faster than short surahs.” (PAI Teacher, 19-2-2025)</p>	<p>Interviews with the principal and general subject teachers</p>

• Limited religious facilities	Facilities such as prayer rooms and ablution spaces were inadequate. A BK teacher stated, "Sometimes students have to wait too long for ablution because the facilities are limited." (BK Teacher, 17-2-2025)	Observation of school facilities and student population
Character Evaluation Mechanisms		
Student observation and self-reflection	Students were encouraged to reflect on their behavior regularly. A teacher stated, "Every Friday, we ask them to write reflections on what they've done well and what they need to improve." (PAI Teacher 2, 22-2-2025)	Student reflections and classroom journals
Use of character report cards	The character report card includes indicators of students' moral and social values such as responsibility, politeness, and empathy. Example indicators: "Able to express opinions respectfully"; "Completes assignments on time."	Report card documents and attitude assessment tools

1. Implementation of PAI Learning Strategies

This study found that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning strategies implemented at SMK Darut Taqwa were designed contextually to internalize Islamic character values through practical engagement and habitual religious practices. PAI teachers consistently instilled routines such as ablution (*wudhu*), congregational prayer, and Qur'anic recitation (*tadarus*) prior to classroom instruction. These routines served not only to nurture students' spiritual awareness but also to foster discipline and responsibility in their daily lives. One notable innovation observed was the practice of encouraging students to ask questions at the beginning of each lesson. This strategy was intended to stimulate critical thinking and enhance focus. By promoting active inquiry before the delivery of material, the strategy effectively developed student confidence and active participation. This reflects a pedagogical shift from passive to more participatory and reflective learning approaches.

2. The Role of Teachers as Moral Exemplars

The role of teachers as role models was identified as a central component in the character formation process. PAI teachers were not merely transmitters of religious content but also embodied the values they taught through daily conduct. Their consistency in performing religious practices, using polite and respectful language, and resolving conflict wisely served as living examples for students. Over time, students were observed to emulate these behaviors, internalizing them gradually through daily interaction. Moreover, teachers demonstrated sensitivity toward students' diverse backgrounds by applying differentiated approaches based on individual needs. This indicates the application of a humanistic and contextual pedagogical model, where the teacher's role extends beyond

instruction to include emotional and social guidance tailored to each student's experiences.

3. School–Parent Collaboration

Collaboration between the school and parents emerged as a vital factor in supporting character education. The school actively maintained communication through formal forums such as parent meetings, joint religious events, and digital platforms like class WhatsApp groups. These channels enabled teachers to provide real-time updates on students' moral development, while parents could offer complementary support at home. Furthermore, parental involvement went beyond communication. Many parents participated in school events such as Islamic holidays and community service programs. This strengthened the moral messages conveyed at school and reinforced character formation as a shared responsibility between educational institutions and families.

4. Effectiveness of Strategies on Character Development

The applied strategies showed a substantial impact on student character development. Based on teacher observations and reports, students demonstrated improved discipline, enhanced engagement in worship activities, and increased confidence in expressing questions and opinions. They also displayed greater empathy and social awareness, such as offering help to peers and showing respect for teachers. These changes were not momentary but evident in students' daily routines and attitudes, suggesting that habituation and role modeling had a lasting transformative effect. The findings affirm that character development strategies grounded in practice and example are effective in sustaining behavioral change.

5. Challenges in Character Formation

Despite their success, several challenges were identified in the implementation of character education. One major obstacle was the pervasive influence of digital culture and social media, which often promote values that conflict with Islamic ethics. Exposure to violent, permissive, and materialistic content became part of students' daily consumption, influencing their attitudes and thought patterns. In addition, internal challenges included limited parental involvement, lack of coordination among teachers—especially those not teaching PAI—and insufficient religious infrastructure such as ablution facilities and prayer spaces. The absence of consistent engagement from non-PAI teachers led to fragmented messaging, indicating a need for cross-disciplinary integration and collective responsibility among educators.

6. Evaluation in Character Formation

Character evaluation was conducted continuously and comprehensively. Teachers observed students' behavior both in and out of class and facilitated regular self-reflection

activities to help students become aware of their moral growth. The school also employed a formal character report card as an assessment tool, which included indicators such as honesty, responsibility, politeness, and social care. Parental involvement was integral to this evaluative process. Teachers regularly communicated students' progress and encouraged parents to take part in follow-up support at home. This approach positioned evaluation not merely as a final measurement, but as an ongoing, participatory, and formative process that contributed to the sustained development of students' moral character.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the contextual effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) strategies in shaping students' character at SMK Darut Taqwa through a synergistic interplay of worship habituation, teacher exemplarity, and school–family collaboration. Practices such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and the habit of initiating learning with student questions have created a learning environment conducive to the internalization of Islamic values (Judrah et al., 2024; Muttaqin et al., 2024).

These daily routines go beyond ritual observance; they cultivate discipline, attentiveness, and spiritual mindfulness as integrated aspects of character formation. Central to this process is the role of the teacher as a moral exemplar. PAI teachers at SMK Darut Taqwa do not merely convey religious content but embody the values they teach through consistent ethical behavior, respectful communication, and pedagogical patience. This embodiment reflects the classical Islamic educational ideal, wherein the teacher serves both as a *mu'allim* (knowledge transmitter) and *murabbi* (character nurturer), consistent with al-Al-Attas (1980) conception of *ta'dib*, which places adab above intellectual attainment (*al-adabu fawqa al-'ilmi*).

Such approaches also align with Thought (1989) epistemological view that Islamic education must integrate value, knowledge, and action through a tawhidic worldview. His concept of "Islamization of knowledge" requires that educators model an integrated ethical character, not merely transfer content. The teachers' differential approaches toward students of various backgrounds further reflect a humanistic and contextual pedagogy (Nurmilah & Irfani, 2024).

The study also highlights the significance of collaborative moral transmission between school and family. Through parent-teacher meetings, religious events, and digital communication platforms, the school involves parents in reinforcing moral values beyond the classroom. This model resonates with the principles of *usul al-tarbiyah al-islamiyyah* (Mulyana et al., 2019) which emphasizes shared moral responsibility between school and home. Nevertheless, structural challenges remain. One major concern is the limited involvement of non-PAI teachers in character education. Some educators consider character formation the sole responsibility of religious teachers, leading to inconsistency in the moral messages students receive across subjects (Herawati et al., 2025). This gap reflects the absence of a whole-school approach and underscores the need for unified educational efforts.

across the curriculum (Yaşaroğlu, 2016). Infrastructural limitations, such as inadequate ablution and prayer spaces, also impede optimal habituation. While teachers reinforce values effectively, the lack of physical support undermines institutional consistency. This mirrors what Al-Attas (1980) describes as a crisis of *adab*, wherein institutional structures fail to reflect the moral vision they claim to uphold. In the broader context of global moral education, this study challenges dominant Western models. Kohlberg's moral development theory, for example, emphasizes cognitive reasoning stages, but often ignores spiritual and relational dimensions (Kohlberg, 1981). In contrast, the pesantren-based model employed at SMK Darut Taqwa emphasizes communal practices, spiritual rituals, and teacher-student intimacy—producing moral transformation through lived experience, not abstract reasoning (Achmadin et al., 2024; Buresh, 2002; Fitria, 2025; Nurtawab, 2018)

Similar values can be found in Southeast Asian moral education—such as the Buddhist character model in Thailand or the Filipino *bayanihan* tradition—but the pesantren model adds a structured mechanism for moral evaluation, such as character report cards and reflective journals (Anisah, 2023). These instruments, rarely present in other models, provide ongoing feedback and assessment in both cognitive and affective domains. Thus, the theoretical contribution of this study lies in its synthesis of Islamic educational thought and its practical embodiment in a pesantren-based vocational context. It responds to the call for an integrative moral pedagogy that is culturally embedded, theologically sound, and socially responsive. The integration of *ta'dib*, *tawhidic integration*, and family-school collaboration creates a replicable model of Islamic character education in the face of modern ethical and spiritual crises. Ultimately, the experience at SMK Darut Taqwa affirms that Islamic education, when rooted in local wisdom and spiritual practice, can offer a sustainable moral alternative to secular-individualistic paradigms. The pedagogical implication is clear: character must not be an ancillary objective, but the heart of the learning process—embodied, evaluated, and reinforced across all dimensions of school life.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) strategies implemented at SMK Darut Taqwa, Pasuruan—centered on worship habituation, teacher exemplarity, and school-parent collaboration—have significantly contributed to the contextual and sustainable development of students' character. Routine practices such as congregational prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and the habit of encouraging students to ask questions at the beginning of lessons have created a learning environment that actively and participatively supports the internalization of Islamic values. The role of teachers as moral exemplars serves as a fundamental pillar in this internalization process, not only through the delivery of instructional content but also through the consistent enactment of Islamic values in everyday life. Parental involvement in communication forums and religious activities has further reinforced the continuity of character development at home, positioning character education as a collective responsibility shared between school and family. However, the study also identifies structural challenges that warrant attention, including the suboptimal involvement of non-PAI teachers in character development and the limited availability of religious facilities, which constrain the effectiveness of habituation practices. These findings suggest that the

success of such strategies is not determined solely by pedagogical approaches but also by the presence of a supportive social and institutional ecosystem. The principal contribution of this study lies in its integration of pesantren-based values into character education strategies within an Islamic vocational school context—a setting that has been relatively underexplored in academic literature. By combining spiritual practices, social modeling, and family partnerships, this article proposes a contextual, systematic, and replicable model of Islamic character education applicable to other Islamic educational institutions. Theoretically, the findings reinforce the importance of adab-based character education within an integrative Islamic framework, while offering an alternative to dominant Western models of moral education that often emphasize abstraction and individualism. Practically, the identified strategies may serve as a valuable reference for PAI teachers, school administrators, and policymakers in designing character curricula rooted in local wisdom and spiritual values. For future development, this study recommends evaluating the cross-functional roles of educators in character formation and strengthening infrastructure that supports value-based education. Moreover, further research could explore the application of similar strategies in other vocational school contexts, both domestically and internationally, to enrich the conceptual foundation of Islamic character education in the global discourse.

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