

Cultivating Religious Character in Eighth-Grade Students at MTs Darul Ma'arif Purwodadi for the 2024/2025 Academic Year

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ABSTRACT

The erosion of students' religious character in Islamic schools has become an urgent educational challenge, particularly in fostering discipline, moral awareness, and respectful behavior. This study investigates how religious character is cultivated among eighth-grade students at MTs Darul Ma'arif Purwodadi in the 2024/2025 academic year and evaluates the effectiveness of institutional religious habituation programs. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and institutional documentation. Data were analyzed using an interactive model of data reduction, data display, and verification, with triangulation applied to ensure trustworthiness. The results indicate that religious character formation is facilitated through an integrated system of religious habituation, including Asmaul Husna recitation, Qur'anic literacy (BTQ), congregational prayers, and regular Qur'an recitation. These practices, supported by consistent teacher supervision and role modeling, contribute to increased religious awareness, improved discipline, and more positive student behavior. However, variations in student engagement and self-discipline suggest the need for more individualized reinforcement strategies. This study contributes to Islamic education literature by demonstrating how structured religious routines and pedagogical modeling can serve as an effective framework for character education in madrasah settings.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the decline of students' moral and religious character has become a major concern in both general and Islamic education systems. Rapid social change, digital exposure, and weakening family supervision have contributed to increasing behavioral problems among adolescents, including lack of discipline, disrespect toward teachers, and declining religious commitment (Shalahuddin et al., 2024; Suardi, 2018). In the context of Islamic education, this condition is particularly critical because madrasahs are not only expected to deliver academic knowledge but also to cultivate students' moral and religious identity.

Character education is defined as a systematic process of developing students' moral values, attitudes, and behaviors in accordance with social and religious norms (Maulidiyah et al., 2022). Religious character, as a core component of character education in Islamic schools, includes obedience in worship, honesty, discipline, responsibility, and respectful behavior toward others (Muzakkir, 2021). Therefore, strengthening religious character is not merely a complementary goal but a fundamental mission of madrasah education.

Previous studies have shown that character formation can be facilitated through various educational activities. Extracurricular programs such as scouting and arts-based learning have been reported to enhance discipline, cooperation, and responsibility among students (Haris et al., 2024; Ramdhoni, 2019; Sudrajat, 2024). Other studies emphasize the role of peer interaction and social environment in shaping students' moral and religious behavior (Kurniawan & Sudrajat, 2020). Religious-based extracurricular activities, such as rebana and Islamic arts, also contribute to

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strengthening students' religious values (Vitriyany, 2024). However, these studies primarily focus on extracurricular or co-curricular activities and do not sufficiently explore the role of daily religious habituation within the formal school system.

Moreover, the success of character education is influenced by multiple factors, including school culture, teacher modeling, family background, and students' socio-economic environment (Lailiyah & Badi'ah, 2019; Suardi, 2018). Teachers play a crucial role as moral exemplars, and consistent habituation practices are essential for internalizing religious values (Muzakkir, 2021). Despite these findings, empirical studies that examine how structured religious routines in madrasahs shape students' religious character remain limited, particularly in rural or semi-urban Islamic secondary schools.

MTs Darul Ma'arif Purwodadi represents a typical Islamic junior secondary school with students from diverse socio-cultural and family backgrounds. Preliminary observations indicate that some students still demonstrate low discipline, limited religious awareness, and inconsistent participation in religious activities. This condition suggests a gap between the institutional goals of character education and students' actual behavior. However, systematic academic research on how religious character is cultivated in this madrasah context has not yet been conducted.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the process of cultivating religious character among eighth-grade students at MTs Darul Ma'arif Purwodadi during the 2024/2025 academic year. Specifically, it investigates how religious habituation programs—such as Qur'anic literacy, congregational prayers, and Asmaul Husna recitation—are implemented and how they contribute to students' religious character development. By doing so, this study is expected to contribute to the literature on Islamic character education by providing empirical insights into the effectiveness of structured religious habituation within madrasah settings.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore in depth how religious character is cultivated among eighth-grade students at MTs Darul Ma'arif Purwodadi. A case study approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of social and educational phenomena within their real-life context, particularly in examining values, attitudes, and behavioral development in Islamic school settings.

Research Site and Duration

The research was conducted at MTs Darul Ma'arif Purwodadi, an Islamic junior secondary school located in Purwodadi, Indonesia. Data collection took place from November 2024 to April 2025, allowing sufficient time to observe the implementation of religious habituation programs and their influence on students' behavior.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in religious character education. They included the principal, the vice principal for student affairs, two religious education teachers, the homeroom teacher of grade VIII, and twelve eighth-grade students representing diverse academic and socio-cultural backgrounds. These participants were chosen to provide comprehensive perspectives on policy, implementation, and student experiences related to religious character cultivation.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using three complementary techniques:

a. Observation

Non-participant observations were conducted during daily and weekly religious activities, including Asmaul Husna recitation, Qur'anic reading and writing (BTQ), congregational Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers, and Qur'an recitation. An observation checklist was used to record students' discipline, participation, and adherence to religious practices.

b. Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, school leaders, and selected students. Interview guides focused on perceptions of religious character, implementation strategies, challenges, and observed changes in students' behavior.

c. Documentation

Institutional documents such as school regulations, religious activity schedules, attendance lists, and student disciplinary records were analyzed to support observational and interview data.

Indicators of Religious Character

Religious character was assessed based on observable indicators adapted from Islamic character education literature, including:

- a. consistency in performing daily prayers,
- b. participation in Qur'anic activities,
- c. discipline and punctuality,
- d. respectful behavior toward teachers and peers, and
- e. responsibility in religious duties.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of:

- a. Data reduction through coding and categorization,
- b. Data display in the form of matrices and thematic summaries, and
- c. Conclusion drawing and verification.

The analysis was conducted continuously throughout the data collection process to allow emerging themes to guide further observations and interviews.

Trustworthiness

The credibility of the data was ensured through source triangulation (teachers, students, and school leaders) and method triangulation (observation, interviews, and documentation). Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm accuracy and interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the school authority. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and parental consent was obtained for student participants. Participants' identities were anonymized to protect confidentiality.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Development of Discipline and Worship Awareness through Congregational Prayers

The findings indicate that the habituation of Dhuha and Dhuhr congregational prayers plays a significant role in strengthening students' discipline and worship awareness. Observations show

that most eighth-grade students consistently participate in congregational prayers, demonstrate readiness for ablution, arrange prayer rows neatly, and follow the prayers solemnly. This routine encourages punctuality, orderliness, and collective responsibility among students.

A religious education teacher stated:

“Students are now more disciplined in preparing themselves for prayer. Even those who were previously reluctant have started to participate regularly.”

However, several students were observed engaging in less serious behavior, such as talking or joking during prayers. Teachers responded to this issue through immediate guidance and reminders, emphasizing the importance of sincerity in worship. This finding aligns with Fauziyah et al. (2024), who argue that congregational prayer habituation fosters discipline, patience, and moral self-control when accompanied by consistent teacher supervision.

From a character education perspective, congregational prayer functions not only as a ritual obligation but also as a medium for internalizing discipline and collective religious values. The presence of teachers as role models strengthens the effectiveness of this habituation process (Muzakkir, 2021).

Internalization of Religious Values through Asmaul Husna Recitation

Asmaul Husna recitation is implemented as a routine religious activity and is generally conducted in a conducive atmosphere. Most students are able to recite Asmaul Husna fluently and correctly, following proper pronunciation and rhythm. The involvement of students as rotating leaders fosters responsibility and confidence, while teacher supervision ensures correctness and discipline.

Nevertheless, observations reveal that a small number of students exhibit low concentration and discipline during the activity. According to the vice principal for student affairs:

“Some students still see Asmaul Husna as a routine obligation rather than a spiritual practice, so continuous guidance is needed.”

This finding suggests that habituation alone is insufficient without reflective understanding. Anam and Rustyawati (2024) emphasize that Asmaul Husna habituation becomes more effective in shaping religious character when students understand the meaning and values behind the divine attributes. Thus, combining recitation with reflective explanation could enhance the internalization of religious values.

Cultivation of Respect for the Qur'an through Tadarus Al-Qur'an

Morning Tadarus Al-Qur'an activities contribute positively to students' respect for and attachment to the Qur'an. Most students participate enthusiastically, demonstrating discipline and attentiveness during recitation. This routine helps create a religious school culture and reinforces students' spiritual identity.

Despite these positive outcomes, some students were observed lacking focus, particularly during early morning sessions. Teachers addressed this issue by providing motivation and reminding students of the spiritual significance of Qur'anic recitation. As one homeroom teacher noted:

“Students who regularly participate in tadarus tend to be calmer and more respectful during class activities.”

This supports Tubagus Ahda et al. (2022), who argue that Qur'anic habituation strengthens students' moral awareness and encourages the application of Islamic values in daily behavior. The findings confirm that consistent tadarus activities help cultivate reverence toward the Qur'an and reinforce religious discipline.

Strengthening Religious Character through BTQ (Qur'anic Literacy) Learning

BTQ learning serves as a foundational component in developing students' religious character, particularly in fostering consistency in worship and respect for religious knowledge. Students generally show enthusiasm and discipline during BTQ sessions, especially in memorizing short surahs and practicing recitation.

However, the study found that some students still experience difficulties in applying tajwid rules and proper pronunciation (makharijul huruf). This challenge highlights the need for more intensive guidance and individualized practice. A BTQ teacher explained:

"Students' motivation is high, but their technical reading skills vary. Continuous practice and teacher modeling are essential."

Khoirunnisa et al. (2024) support this finding by emphasizing that effective BTQ programs require not only routine practice but also strong teacher exemplarity. Teacher competence and consistency play a crucial role in shaping students' religious discipline and confidence in performing Qur'anic recitation.

Discussion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that structured religious habituation programs at MTs Darul Ma'arif Purwodadi contribute positively to the cultivation of students' religious character, particularly in terms of discipline, worship awareness, and respect for religious practices. These results support the theory that character education is most effective when implemented through consistent routines, supported by teacher modeling and a conducive school culture (Maulidiyah et al., 2022; Muzakir, 2021).

However, variations in student discipline and engagement indicate that habituation must be complemented with reflective understanding and individualized guidance. Without internal motivation, religious practices risk becoming merely formal routines. Therefore, integrating reflective discussions and value-based explanations into religious activities is essential to deepen character internalization.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the cultivation of religious character among eighth-grade students at MTs Darul Ma'arif Purwodadi is effectively supported by a structured system of religious habituation integrated into daily school routines. The findings demonstrate that consistent practices such as congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, Asmaul Husna habituation, and BTQ learning contribute to the development of students' discipline, worship awareness, respect for religious practices, and moral self-control. The research further reveals that teacher modeling and continuous supervision play a decisive role in transforming religious activities from mere routines into meaningful character-building experiences. Students who regularly engage in guided religious practices tend to display greater consistency in worship, improved discipline, and more respectful behavior toward teachers and peers. However, variations in students' commitment and focus indicate that habituation alone is insufficient without reflective guidance and personal reinforcement. These findings suggest that religious character education in madrasahs should not only rely on ritual-based activities but must also be strengthened through value internalization, teacher exemplarity, and supportive school culture. Therefore, Islamic secondary schools are encouraged to integrate reflective learning and individualized mentoring into their religious programs to ensure deeper and more sustainable character formation. This study contributes to the field of Islamic education by providing empirical evidence that structured religious habituation,

when supported by effective pedagogical modeling, can serve as a powerful framework for cultivating students' religious character in madrasah settings.

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