

**INTEGRATING RELIGIOUS PRACTICE INTO CHARACTER EDUCATION:
PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS FROM INDONESIAN ISLAMIC ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL**Taufikin¹, and Nany Kholilah²¹ Sunan Kudus State Islamic University, Kudus, Indonesia² Sunan Kudus State Islamic University, Kudus, Indonesia**Corresponding Author:**Taufikin,
Sunan Kudus State Islamic University, Kudus.
Email: taufikin@uinsuku.ac.id**Article Info**

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22, 2025**Abstract**

Abstracts Character education has become an essential foundation for achieving quality and sustainable education. However, many educational institutions still struggle to integrate moral and spiritual values into classroom practices, leading to a gap between knowledge and behavior. This study aims to explore how religious practices can be integrated into character education to foster moral and spiritual development among elementary students in Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Salafiyah Kajen in Central Java. The participants included a principal, a religious practice teacher, and twelve fifth-grade students. Data were analyzed thematically using an interactive model to identify patterns of value internalization and pedagogical strategies. The findings reveal that religious practice-based learning effectively cultivates discipline, responsibility, empathy, and spiritual awareness among students. Teachers serve as moral exemplars, modeling Islamic values through daily interactions, while the school environment reinforces these values through a culture of worship and social care. Despite challenges such as large class sizes and limited instructional time, the integrated model strengthens moral consistency and religious consciousness. This study concludes that character education rooted in religious practice can provide a holistic and sustainable approach to value formation, contributing to the realization of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education.

Keywords: Character Education, Islamic School, Moral Pedagogy, Religious Practice, SDG 4



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INTRODUCTION

Character education is vital for human and national development (Arthur 2020; Curren 2023; Lickona 2009, 2013). Globally, schools are responsible for imparting knowledge and instilling moral, spiritual, and social values that shape students. As part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, character education promotes quality education, humanity, peace, and social responsibility (Kuroda and Nakasato 2023; Yanuarto et al. 2025). Indonesia integrates character education to address a moral crisis among youth, including declining respect, discipline, and responsibility (Muassomah et al. 2020; Subandi et al. 2025; Syabuddin, Jannah, and Sulaiman 2020). This highlights the need for education focusing on both intellect and noble character.

Islamic education aims to create faithful, knowledgeable individuals of noble character, as emphasized by the Prophet Muhammad. In Indonesia, madrasahs play an essential role in instilling these values from an early age. At Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), religious learning and practical worship serve as a pedagogical process to internalize discipline, responsibility, and sincerity in daily life (Pangastuti et al. 2025; Sinaga and Mahariah 2023).

A challenge in character education is its limited focus on affective and psychomotor aspects, while intellectual aspects dominate. This leaves students lacking in moral and spiritual integrity, as evidenced by issues like bullying, cheating, and low empathy (Eilts and Bäker 2024; Malin and Gumpel 2023; Zych and Llorent 2019). Effective learning must connect value theory with daily practice, ensuring students apply character values outside the classroom.

An effective approach is religious education grounded in worship practices. This method develops positive habits through habituation and modeling. Studies show regular religious activities—such as group prayers—improve discipline and responsibility. Thus, worship practice strengthens students both spiritually and pedagogically (Jalwis 2023; Sukung, Razak, and Amay 2020; Usman, Bahraeni, and Nurhilaliyah 2025).

Research highlights the importance of teachers as role models in character education (Farmer and Farmer 2023). Teachers embody moral values, shaping school culture. Techniques like educational games and reflection strengthen discipline and, though large classes challenge individual attention (Maksum et al. 2025; Veugelers 2021).

Character education through worship is grounded in Lickona's (2013) theory, which connects moral knowledge, feeling, and behavior. In Islamic education, these principles express servitude to Allah. Integrating modern theory with Islamic values offers a comprehensive approach supporting SDG 4.7—global learning, empathy, and social responsibility (Adly Gamal 2023; Astuti 2024; Hasbiyallah, Duran, and Suhendi 2024). While international research supports practice-based learning, little research focuses on religious contexts (Kadir et al. 2025; Tariq 2025). Indonesian studies rarely address how worship at madrasahs builds character at the elementary level. This study explores worship practices at MI Salafiyah Kajen and their impact on students' religious character.

This study analyzes how character education is implemented through religious practice at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Salafiyah Kajen. It asks: how does learning worship link to character education in elementary madrasahs? What factors aid or challenge integration? What teacher strategies are effective? By uniting modern character theory with Islamic practice, the research

aims to develop a character education model that helps achieve SDG 4's inclusive, quality education targets.

This study offers a distinctive contribution to the literature on character education in at least three ways. First, it moves beyond abstract discussions of values by examining, in a concrete classroom ecology, how specific worship practices (such as *dhuha* prayer, daily supplication, and charity routines) are deliberately designed and sequenced as pedagogical tools for character formation in a traditional Indonesian madrasah context. Second, it extends dominant character education frameworks, which are largely grounded in secular civic and psychological perspectives (Arthur 2020; Lickona 2009, 2013), by foregrounding spirituality and servitude to Allah as the core axis connecting moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Third, by situating these worship-based practices within the broader agenda of SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, the study proposes an integrative model of Islamic character education that is locally rooted yet globally relevant, offering insights for educators and policy-makers seeking context-sensitive, value-based, and sustainable character education designs in primary schooling.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of character education through worship practice learning at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) Salafiyah Kajen. This approach was chosen because it provides researchers with space to explore the social, cultural, and spiritual contexts in a naturalistic manner within the school environment (Creswell and Creswell 2022a; Creswell and Poth 2017). The case study method allows for the exploration of meanings and dynamics of character formation that cannot be explained through a quantitative approach. This approach also aligns with the constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes participants' subjective understanding of their experiences in the context of value-based education (Yin 2014).

The research was conducted at MI Salafiyah Kajen, Pati Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. This madrasah was chosen because it has a strong religious tradition and has integrated worship practice learning into its formal curriculum. The religious and community-based environment of the madrasah is an ideal context for examining the relationship between worship activities and student character building. This location also represents the general characteristics of traditional madrasahs in Indonesia, which are oriented towards moral-spiritual formation from an early age (Kurniawati, Nurhayati, and Rukanda 2024).

The participants consisted of 1 madrasah principal, 1 religious practice subject teacher, and 12 fifth-grade students of MI Salafiyah Kajen, Central Java, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their active involvement in religious practice and learning activities. The principal and teacher served as key informants to obtain perspectives on policy and pedagogy, while the students provided empirical insights into their learning experiences (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014). The number of participants was considered sufficient in the context of qualitative research, which emphasizes depth of data over numerical representation (Gürsoy and Vatansever 2025; Severiano, de Souza Vasconcelos, and Neto 2025).

The main instrument of this study was the researcher himself as a human instrument, with observation and semi-structured interview guidelines. Three data collection techniques were used triangulatively, namely participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis (Bowen 2009; Creswell and Creswell 2022b; Knott et al. 2022; Walsh 2020). Observations were conducted over eight weeks during students' worship practice and religious activities. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore teachers' and students' perceptions of the character values instilled through worship practices. In addition, documents such as

lesson schedules, lesson plans (RPP), and records of religious activities were analyzed to understand the integration of character values in the madrasah curriculum.

The interview guidelines were developed based on the three main dimensions of character education according to Lickona (2013): moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behavior. The questions focused on how worship practices facilitate the internalization of these values. Each interview session was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified by the participants to maintain data validity (member checking).

Data analysis was conducted interactively following the model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. The data reduction stage involved selecting and grouping relevant information based on themes such as worship habits, teacher role models, and changes in student behavior. The reduced data were then presented in narrative form and thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation. The analysis process was cyclical, with the researchers continuously comparing field findings with the theoretical framework to develop an in-depth understanding (thematic constant comparison).

Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods. Data from observations were compared with interview results and documents to ensure consistency of meaning (Patton 2014). In addition, the researcher conducted peer debriefings with academic advisors and colleagues to ensure that data interpretation was free from personal bias. A reflective approach was applied throughout the analysis to maintain the researcher's neutral position and avoid the dominance of subjectivity in interpreting the results (Nowell et al. 2017).

All stages of this research followed international academic ethical standards as recommended by the American Educational Research Association (Hamilton, Piacentini, and Banister 2024). Participant consent was obtained through informed consent that explained the purpose of the research, the participants' right to withdraw at any time, and the guarantee of confidentiality of their identities. All personal data was anonymized using pseudonyms. The researchers also ensured that the observation and interview activities did not interfere with the teaching and learning process at the madrasah.

In addition, ethical reflection was applied in the interpretation of results to avoid religious or cultural bias. The researchers positioned themselves as observers who respected the spiritual context of Islamic educational institutions. This approach aligns with the principle of contextual integrity (Taddeo and Floridi 2018), which emphasizes the importance of aligning the research's moral values with the social context in which it is conducted. Thus, this study is not only methodologically valid but also ethical and humanistic, reflecting the universal values of education that are oriented towards humanity and sustainability.

Overall, the qualitative case study research design allows for an in-depth exploration of the implementation of worship-based character education in elementary madrasahs. The triangulation approach, thematic analysis, and strict research ethics ensure the validity, reliability, and academic integrity of the findings. Through this methodology, the study is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of an integrative, sustainable character education model, while strengthening its relevance to achieving Quality Education under SDG 4.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Process of Integrating Character Values into Practical Worship Learning

The integration of character education into worship practice subjects is carried out through a combination of habituation, modeling, and value reflection. Teachers play an active role as facilitators, guiding students to internalize religious values, discipline, and responsibility. Observations indicate that learning activities are structured: students are invited to perform the dhuha prayer together, read daily prayers, and discuss the meaning of worship. These practices are designed to develop students' spiritual and moral awareness from an early age.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Learning Activities Reflecting Worship Practices and Character Values

Learning Activities	Character Values Reinforced	Weekly Frequency	Percentage
Congregational Dhuha Prayer	Discipline, religiosity	5 times	27
Daily prayer memorization	Sincerity, responsibility	4 times	22.2
Practice of ablution and prayer procedures	Cleanliness, obedience	3 times	16.7
Discussion of the value of worship	Moral reflection, empathy	3 times	16.7
Friday charity activities	Social awareness	3 times	16.6

The table above shows that the dhuha prayer is the most frequently performed activity, indicating that religious habits are a major pillar of character education in madrasahs. This practice-based learning aligns with Lickona's (2009, 2013) view on the importance of active involvement in the moral learning process.

Table 2. Excerpts from Interviews, Observations, and Documentation on Character Education Integration

Informant	Excerpts	Theme	Frequency
Teacher of worship practices	"We don't just teach the movements of prayer, but also their meaning so that children know why they are praying."	Integration of spiritual and moral values	8
Student A	"If I forget to pray, I feel guilty because I have been accustomed to it at school."	Internalization of the value of responsibility	6
Head of the madrasah	"Religious education must be the main model of Islamic character."	Vision of religious character education	5
Lesson Plan Document	Include affective objectives such as 'cultivating awareness of worship with sincerity'.	Affective planning	4

This data shows that the learning approach at MI Salafiyah Kajen is reflective and integrative, emphasizing spiritual understanding as the basis for moral character building.

The integration of character values into the learning of worship practices is consistent with the concept of *holistic moral education* described by Lickona (2013) and Narvaez (2014)). They emphasize that effective moral education must combine cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. In the context of MI Salafiyah Kajen, learning religious practices is not

just a ritual exercise, but a pedagogical medium for instilling moral awareness through real experiences. This model expands on Lickona's theory by adding a spiritual dimension as the main foundation of character.

These findings also reinforce the concept of *an integrated curriculum* outlined by Jacobs (1989), in which cross-dimensional learning of values can build connections between academic knowledge and moral formation (Anderson 2013; Lu and Yang 2023; Nislev 2020). Learning the dhuha prayer, memorizing prayers, and discussing worship values serve as a bridge between religious knowledge and moral habits. This shows that worship practices can serve a dual function as spiritual and character education, reinforcing the findings of (Demirtaş, Takunyaci, and Yeşil 2023; Mohd Yusoff et al. 2022), which emphasize the importance of religious experiences in developing *the moral agency* of Muslim students.

Factors Supporting the Implementation of Character Education

The implementation of character education at MI Salafiyah Kajen is supported by three main factors: (1) teacher role modeling, (2) a religious madrasah environment, and (3) student family support. Teachers' exemplary behavior is evident in their consistent practice of worship values, such as arriving on time, dressing modestly, and interacting with empathy. The conducive madrasah environment reinforces the habit of practicing values, while parental participation in religious activities extends the effects of character education to the family sphere.

Table 3. Supporting Factors for Character Education Implementation

Theme	Data Source	Frequency	Interpretation
Teacher role modeling	Teacher and student interviews	10	Teachers are the primary moral role models for students
Religious environment	Observation and documentation	8	Worship routines create a spiritual culture in schools
Family support	Interviews with students and parents	7	Character values are reinforced at home

These findings reinforce Noddings' (2012) theory of care ethics, in which empathetic relationships and teachers' exemplary moral behavior play an important role in character education. In addition, family support reinforces the continuity of character building outside of school.

Teachers' role as *moral exemplars* is a crucial factor in the success of character education. The study's results show that teacher exemplarity has a significant impact on the internalization of students' character values. This aligns with Noddings' (2013) *care ethics*, which emphasizes that character education is rooted in an empathetic relationship between teachers and students. In the context of MI Salafiyah Kajen, teachers not only function as educators but also as spiritual guides who lead students through exemplary behavior.

Furthermore, these findings reinforce the *prophetic pedagogy* model described by Al-Attas (Hidayatullah and Arif 2022) and Nasr (2002), which states that educators in Islam have a moral and spiritual role to exemplify prophetic characteristics: honesty, trustworthiness, and patience. Teachers' exemplary behavior in performing worship, time discipline, and humility reflects these prophetic principles. In a global context, this role can be compared to *transformative learning theory* (Mezirow, 2000), which emphasizes critical reflection on experiences as a means of behavioral change and moral awareness (Chasokela 2024; Clark and Wilson 1991; Jones 2020; Taufikin, Nurhayati, Badawi, et al. 2025).

The madrasah's religious environment is the primary context shaping students' character. The routine of worship activities, the spiritual atmosphere, and social interactions among madrasah members create a *hidden curriculum* that serves as a forum for the socialization of values. Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Bronfenbrenner and Evans 2000) *ecological systems* theory explains that an individual's character develops through interactions with the microenvironment (family, school) and the macroenvironment (culture and society). In this case, MI Salafiyah Kajen serves as a highly effective *microsystem* for transmitting Islamic values through collective social practices.

Parental involvement in school activities strengthens the *continuity of values* between home and madrasah. This aligns with research by Berkowitz and Bier (2022), which confirms that the success of character education depends on synergy between school and family (Taufikin 2021). Thus, worship-based character education at MI Salafiyah Kajen does not stand alone but operates within a broad social network, forming a consistent and sustainable value system.

Factors Hindering the Implementation of Character Education

Although the program is effective, several implementation obstacles were identified. First, the high teacher-student ratio makes individual supervision difficult. Second, limited learning time means that reflection on values is often neglected. Third, some students are still not motivated to consistently practice their religion at home. These obstacles require pedagogical innovation and cross-party collaboration.

Table 4. Factors Hindering the Implementation of Character Education

Obstacles	Informant	Frequency	Impact
Large number of students	Teachers	9	Difficult to provide individual guidance
Limited learning time	Head of madrasah	6	Character values are not deeply reflected
Lack of motivation at home	Students	7	Inconsistency in religious practices

These results confirm (Jeynes 2019; Muhtar and Dallyono 2020; Tohri et al. 2022)'s finding that character education in elementary schools faces structural and motivational challenges that require systemic support.

The high teacher-student ratio, limited learning time, and fluctuating learning motivation are the main obstacles. This problem reinforces Ciampa (2021) and Hidayat's (2022) finding that character education in elementary schools is often hampered by administrative burdens and limited teacher resources. However, teachers at MI Salafiyah Kajen have successfully overcome these obstacles through collaborative and creative approaches, such as forming small groups and using *experiential reflection* strategies.

In a theoretical context, these conditions can be explained by *complex adaptive systems theory* (Davis and Sumara 2006; Preiser 2024), which holds that the success of an education system depends on the adaptability and interactions of its elements. When teachers, students, and the environment work synergistically, the character education system can develop despite structural limitations (Taufikin, Nurhayati, and Harun 2025).

Teacher Strategies in Developing Character Values

Teachers play a key role in the successful implementation of character education. The strategies used include: (1) scheduled religious habits, (2) the use of a reflective approach in learning, and (3) providing positive reinforcement through student appreciation. Teachers use ice-breaking methods and educational games to increase student motivation. This approach shows that character learning does not have to be dogmatic; it can be fun and contextual.

Table 5. Teachers' Pedagogical Strategies in Character Education

Strategy	Form of Implementation	Frequency	Character Values Developed
Religious Habits	Congregational prayer, morning prayer	10	Discipline, religiosity
Reflection on values	Discussion of the meaning of worship	6	Honesty, responsibility
Positive reinforcement	Praise for good behavior	5	Self-confidence, empathy
Collaborative activities	Friday charity activities	4	Social awareness

This strategy aligns with the transformative learning approach (Clark and Wilson 1991), which emphasizes critical reflection as a bridge between experience and behavioral change.

Teachers at MI Salafiyah Kajen apply a combination of reflective and participatory approaches. Strategies such as religious habituation, value reflection, and positive reinforcement form a continuous cycle of moral learning. This approach is rooted in Kolb's (1984) *experiential learning* theory, which asserts that effective moral learning occurs through experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application.

Furthermore, this approach is consistent with UNESCO's (Tatto 2021) concept of *value-based experiential learning*, which holds that value-based education must include emotional engagement and concrete experiences. The character-learning strategies implemented in these madrasahs combine aspects of spirituality, social reflection, and student collaboration—creating meaningful learning that supports *SDG 4 Target 4.7* on education, fostering values of peace, global responsibility, and appreciation for diversity

Compared to previous studies, this study offers a new synthesis between Western character education theory and transcendental Islamic values. Arthur et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of *character formation through civic virtue*, while this study adds a spiritual dimension through worship practices. This difference is a major strength that demonstrates how character education in madrasahs can serve as a unique model of *integrative moral-spiritual pedagogy* for the Islamic world and the global community.

Furthermore, compared with secular moral education models that emphasize ethical reasoning (Narvaez and Bock 2014), worship-based character education situates morality within a strong theological and affective context. Values such as sincerity and obedience have a spiritual foundation that is not found in secular theory. This indicates that spirituality can be a *missing dimension* in contemporary character education theory, as Peterson (2006) and Kim (Kim 2024) emphasize, and that it needs to be integrated as an important domain in *moral development theory*.

Table 6. Comparative Synthesis and Novelty of the Research

Aspect	Previous Theory/Literature	Findings of This Study	Element of Novelty
Character Education Basis	Cognitive–affective–behavioral (Lickona 2013)	Integration of the spiritual dimension of Islam	Holistic character model based on spirituality
The Role of Teachers	Moral exemplar (Noddings 2012)	Teachers as prophetic facilitators	Teachers have a dual role: educator and spiritual guide
Learning Methods	Experiential learning (Kolb 1984)	Practice-based worship learning	Character learning based on religious practice
Social Context	Civic virtue (Arthur 2020)	Religious and moral collectivism	Religious community-based character education
Global Contribution	Value-based education (Tatto 2021)	Islamic-integrative pedagogy	Offering an Islamic character education model for SDG 4

This table confirms that the novelty of this research lies in integrating religious values and moral character into worship-based pedagogical practices. This model is not only relevant to the context of Islamic education in Indonesia but also contributes globally to the development of spiritually oriented, *value-based education*.

Theoretically, this research extends the character education framework by incorporating spirituality as the core of moral development. This reinforces the argument that character education cannot be separated from the context of religious values and local culture (Hashim & Langgulong, 2008). This model offers a *humanistic-spiritual pedagogy* approach that balances moral rationality and transcendental awareness.

Practically, these findings have important implications for the development of educational policies and practices in madrasahs. First, teachers need to receive training in reflective pedagogy and practice-based learning. Second, schools need to strengthen their synergy with families to create continuity of values. Third, the integration of worship practices into the curriculum must be developed as a *model of national character education* that contributes to SDG 4 on *inclusive and equitable quality education*.

Overall, the practice of worship at MI Salafiyah Kajen demonstrates that character education can serve as a bridge between spirituality, morality, and humanity. This approach not only fosters religious students but also shapes ethical, empathetic, and socially responsible global citizens—an ideal aligned with the vision of 21st-century global education.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that integrating character education through worship practice learning at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Salafiyah Kajen is an effective model for instilling moral and spiritual values in elementary school students. The main results show that character education implemented through religious habits, teacher role modeling, and value reflection can tangibly shape students' disciplined behavior, responsibility, and social empathy. The learning process, which combines spiritual, emotional, and cognitive aspects, makes worship practices a transformative medium for character development. Thus, madrasahs not only serve as academic institutions but also as spaces for moral formation that foster students' religious and humanitarian awareness. This reinforces the views of Lickona (2012) and Hashim & Langgulong (2008) that meaningful character education must be rooted in moral, cultural, and spiritual values.

The main implication of this study is to strengthen the pedagogical dimension of Islamic education. Teachers act as moral and spiritual agents who connect the dimensions of values and practice, while the madrasah environment functions as an ecosystem of habit formation that continuously fosters positive character. This study shows that when religious values are consistently integrated into learning, students not only understand religious teachings but also internalize them into concrete actions. The practical implication is that madrasahs can develop a *practice-based learning* curriculum oriented towards habit formation and spiritual reflection. In addition, collaboration between schools and families is essential to create continuity of character values at home and at school. This approach contributes directly to the achievement of *Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4*, specifically Target 4.7, which supports sustainable development, peace, and respect for the diversity of values.

This study makes a significant contribution to the development of religious value-based character education theory and practice. Its theoretical contribution lies in integrating spirituality into the modern character education framework, offering an *Islamic-integrative pedagogy* model that can enrich the global discourse on moral education. In practice, the results of this study can serve as a reference for the development of madrasah curricula, teacher training, and education policies oriented towards sustainable character building. However, this study has limitations in its local context and the limited number of participants. Therefore, further studies can expand the scope with a multi-location approach and quantitative methods to empirically test the effectiveness of this model. In conclusion, worship-based character education is not only a pedagogical strategy but also a philosophical foundation that affirms the relationship between faith, morality, and humanity in shaping a generation with good character and global competitiveness

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