

Reinforcing character education through islamic religious education pedagogy for elementary school students in the digital era

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ABSTRACT

The digital era has significantly influenced elementary school students' behavior, values, and religious practices. Increased exposure to digital technology presents both opportunities and risks, including moral decline, individualism, and weakened religious and social values. In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a strategic role in strengthening students' character formation. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through a literature review, semi-structured interviews with PAI teachers, and classroom observations conducted in several Islamic elementary schools. The data focused on learning practices, character value integration, and challenges in implementing PAI in the digital environment. The findings indicate that PAI effectively fosters key character values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and tolerance when delivered through contextual and innovative learning strategies. PAI teachers function not only as instructors but also as moral role models, spiritual facilitators, and emotional mentors. However, major challenges include limited digital literacy among teachers, insufficient parental supervision of students' media use, and weak coordination between schools and families. The effectiveness of character education through PAI in the digital age depends on strong collaboration among schools, families, and communities, as well as the responsible use of technology. This study recommends enhancing teachers' digital competencies, developing Islamic-based digital learning content, and strengthening the role of families as primary agents of character education.

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Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) plays a fundamental role in shaping students' character by fostering not only intellectual competence but also moral integrity and spiritual maturity (Wijaya et al., 2021). At the elementary school level, PAI serves as a foundational medium for instilling core values that guide students' attitudes, behaviors, and social interactions during their formative years. However, the rapid expansion of digital technology and globalization has significantly transformed the educational landscape, presenting both opportunities and challenges for character education. Digital culture has reshaped how children access information, communicate, and construct personal and social identities (Kusumawati et al., 2023).

While digital technology enables innovative learning resources and broader access to religious knowledge, it simultaneously exposes young learners to content that may undermine moral and religious values. Phenomena such as online aggression, hedonism, pornography, excessive screen dependency, and a culture of instant gratification pose serious threats to the development of patience, self-discipline, responsibility, and spiritual awareness (Karimullah, 2023). This condition reflects a growing imbalance between children's technical proficiency in using digital devices and their ethical readiness to navigate digital spaces responsibly in accordance with Islamic principles (Rosidah et al., 2024). Many elementary students demonstrate high digital fluency, yet lack critical digital literacy and moral filtering skills needed to align their online behaviors with religious and ethical norms (Ulum et al., 2021). These challenges underscore the urgency of strengthening character education through PAI, particularly in primary education as a critical stage of moral and personality formation.

The importance of this effort is supported by several theoretical perspectives. Character Education Theory emphasizes the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, highlighting that character formation requires more than cognitive instruction; it demands internalization and habitual practice (Ramatni et al., 2025). This perspective aligns closely with the objectives of PAI, which seeks to cultivate religious values as lived virtues rather than abstract knowledge. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) further explains that values are internalized through modeling, habituation, and reinforcement—processes inherently embedded in PAI pedagogy. In addition, Digital Literacy frameworks stress the necessity of ethical awareness, critical evaluation, and responsible engagement in digital environments, particularly for young learners (Kurniawati & Fatimah, 2024). These frameworks are complemented by the Indonesian educational philosophy of the Tri-Center of Education (Tri Pusat Pendidikan) proposed by Ki Hajar Dewantara, which emphasizes the shared responsibility of schools, families, and communities in shaping students' character.

Previous studies have examined the intersection of PAI, character education, and digital learning. Research on digital-based PAI learning modules demonstrated improvements in students' religious skills but revealed limited engagement and contextual integration (Shofiyah et al., 2023). Studies conducted in rural contexts indicated that PAI effectively instills moral and spiritual values, although its success heavily depends on strong parental involvement (Ramatni et al., 2025). Other research highlighted the potential of interactive applications and social media to enhance student motivation, while also identifying challenges such as unequal access, limited teacher digital competence, and exposure to low-quality content (Bassar et al., 2021). Despite these contributions, most existing studies focus on secondary education or rural settings, with limited attention to elementary schools in urban environments where digital technology is deeply embedded in daily life (Salisah et al., 2024).

Moreover, prior research often examines digital innovation and character education separately, rather than exploring their systematic integration within PAI learning. Studies addressing collaboration among schools, families, and communities in digital-based religious character education remain scarce. These gaps indicate the need for a comprehensive investigation into how PAI can function innovatively and collaboratively to strengthen essential character values—such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and tolerance—among elementary school students in the digital age.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the strategic role of Islamic Religious Education in strengthening character values among elementary school students in the digital era by examining teacher practices, digital learning integration, and collaborative efforts among schools, families, and communities. By focusing on urban primary school contexts, this research offers novelty

through its emphasis on early character formation, value-based digital pedagogy, and a collaborative model grounded in religious, educational, and digital literacy frameworks.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine in depth the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in shaping students' character in the digital era (Aziz & Amir, 2025). The use of a qualitative descriptive method was deemed appropriate because it allows the researcher to gain a contextual understanding of complex social phenomena, particularly regarding the practices of PAI teaching and character formation in primary school setting (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020)s.

The research was conducted at SDN 2 Pekurun Udik, located in Abung Pekurun District, North Lampung Regency. This school was purposively selected on the grounds that it is an active public school implementing Islamic Religious Education while beginning to incorporate digital media as part of its instructional innovations. The participants of the study included the PAI teacher, students from grades IV to VI, as well as the school principal and classroom teachers who were directly involved in character-based religious education activities. Data were collected through three complementary techniques (Sibbald et al., 2022). First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the PAI teacher to explore teaching strategies, role-modeling practices, and challenges encountered in cultivating students' character in the digital era (Cheong et al., 2023). Second, direct observations were carried out during classroom learning and religious activities at school, focusing on teacher–student interactions, the use of instructional media, and the implementation of Islamic character values. Third, document analysis was undertaken by reviewing instructional materials such as lesson plans (RPP), syllabi, student portfolios, and records of school-based religious activities.

The collected data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which involves three interactive stages (DEWI, 2022). Data reduction was performed to condense, categorize, and select information relevant to the focus of the study. Data display was then carried out in the form of narrative descriptions, excerpts from interview transcripts, and thematic matrices (Khan, 2022). Finally, conclusions were drawn iteratively, allowing the researcher to identify emerging patterns, meanings, and interpretations from the field data (DEWI, 2022). To ensure the credibility and validity of findings, several strategies were employed. Triangulation of sources was conducted by cross-checking information from teachers, students, and school administrators, while triangulation of techniques was achieved by combining interviews, observations, and documentation (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). In addition, member checking was undertaken by presenting preliminary findings and interpretations to key informants, ensuring that the results accurately reflected their perspectives and experiences.

Result

The study conducted at SDN 2 Pekurun Udik demonstrates that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a central role in shaping students' character. Teachers consistently integrate Islamic values into the learning process through contextual approaches and role modeling (Abdillah & Nugraha, 2024). Students participate in daily practices such as reciting prayers, reviewing short surahs, greeting others with salam, performing congregational Dhuha prayers, and contributing alms every Friday (Halim, 2022). Additionally, innovative learning practices have been implemented to accommodate students' familiarity with digital technology. Teachers utilize visual media, learning animations, interactive presentations, and applications such as YouTube and WhatsApp to share materials and assignments. Participatory methods, including online group discussions, Islamic character-based quiz games, and creative projects like poster-making, further encourage student engagement.

Despite these efforts, several challenges were observed. Limited digital literacy among teachers and students, inadequate internet access, and restricted parental involvement were significant barriers. Students also tended to use digital devices more for entertainment than for learning, and the unfiltered flow of online information sometimes exposed them to unreliable or radical religious content. Teachers faced difficulties in ensuring that students internalized correct Islamic values while completing digital assignments, reflecting the need for both educational and technological support.

Discussion

The Role of PAI in Character Formation

The findings of the study confirm that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is pivotal in shaping students' character, particularly in instilling values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and empathy (Ramatni et al., 2025). The integration of Islamic values through contextual teaching and role modeling allows students to internalize moral principles in daily practices, aligning with the theory of Character Education, which emphasizes the necessity of linking cognitive understanding with behavioral practice (Azmi et al., 2024). Daily routines such as reciting prayers, performing congregational Dhuha, and participating in charitable activities reinforce the development of ethical behavior, highlighting the importance of continuity between taught values and lived experiences (Tiara Ramadhani et al., 2024). This approach ensures that students do not merely understand Islamic teachings cognitively but also embody them in social and personal contexts.

Innovations in Digital-Based PAI Learning

The study shows that incorporating digital tools into PAI learning enhances student engagement and contextual understanding (Zabidi & Tamami, 2021). Visual media, interactive presentations, and online applications such as YouTube and WhatsApp provide platforms for delivering Islamic content in ways that resonate with the digital habits of contemporary students. Participatory methods, including group discussions, character-based quiz games, and creative projects, foster reflective learning and active exploration of Islamic values (Muttaqin, 2023). This supports Constructivist Learning Theory, which emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through interaction, reflection, and meaningful engagement with the environment. Digital innovations make learning more relevant and enjoyable, contributing to the holistic development of students' affective, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions.

Challenges and Implications for Effective PAI Learning

Despite these advancements, several challenges limit the effectiveness of PAI in the digital era. Limited digital literacy among teachers and students, unequal access to technology, and insufficient parental involvement hinder the optimal internalization of Islamic values (Syamsul Aripin & Nana Meily Nurdiansyah, 2022). Moreover, the unfiltered nature of online content exposes students to unreliable or extreme religious information, which can distort understanding. This underscores the need for Teacher Professional Development, enhanced parental collaboration, and digital religious literacy initiatives to guide students in evaluating online resources critically (Halim, 2022). By addressing these challenges, PAI learning can not only strengthen character formation but also equip students with the skills to navigate contemporary societal and technological influences while maintaining moral and spiritual integrity (Ashoumi et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study concludes that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a vital role in shaping students' character, particularly in navigating the challenges of the digital era. PAI functions not only as a subject for transmitting religious knowledge but also as a medium for internalizing noble values such as honesty, responsibility, tolerance, and discipline. PAI teachers act as facilitators, moral guides, and role models, while innovative digital methods, participatory learning, and religious habituation practices help ensure relevance in a technologically driven context. Nonetheless, PAI learning continues to face barriers such as limited digital literacy, unequal access to technology, and insufficient parental engagement. Addressing these challenges requires

improving teachers' competencies in creative digital pedagogy, expanding collaboration between schools and families, and reinforcing character-building practices that remain faithful to Islamic values. Ultimately, PAI will remain relevant and impactful if it adapts to modern developments without losing its essence as a source of values rooted in rahmatan lil 'alamin. In doing so, it equips the younger generation not only with intellectual intelligence but also with spiritual resilience and moral strength.

Teachers of Islamic Religious Education should continuously enhance their competence in creatively and contextually using digital technology. Sustained participation in training programs on interactive media and digital religious literacy is essential to ensure engaging and effective PAI learning. Schools, in turn, should provide strong support in terms of digital facilities, reliable internet access, and collaborative platforms for teachers to develop innovative practices. Parents must also play an active role by monitoring children's technology use and serving as role models for Islamic values at home. Finally, future research is encouraged to explore the effectiveness of specific digital-based models of PAI learning, either through experimental studies or classroom action research, to better understand their long-term impact on students' character development.

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