

PAI Teachers' Strategies "Generation Z" in Shaping the Religious Character of Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the strategies employed by Generation Z Islamic Education (PAI) teachers in shaping students' religious character in the digital era. The rapid development of digital technology has influenced students' moral and religious development, requiring adaptive and contextual character education strategies. The purpose of this study is to identify the forms of strategies used by Generation Z PAI teachers, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors in implementing religious character education. This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with data collected through in-depth interviews with Generation Z PAI teachers. The data were analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that Generation Z PAI teachers understand religious character as an integration of spiritual values and social behavior. Their strategies include role modeling, habituation of worship practices, dialogical and reflective learning, moral case discussions, and the utilization of digital media. These strategies are supported by close teacher-student relationships and technological literacy, while challenges arise from social media influence, diverse family backgrounds, and maintaining pedagogical authority. This study highlights the significance of adaptive, integrative, and contextual strategies in strengthening students' religious character and contributes to the development of Islamic character education in the digital era.

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Introduction

Character education is a major concern in global education because social changes and digital technology have affected the way learners build moral values and behaviors (Arthur et al., 2016). The development of digital technology still does not always have a positive impact on character formation, and often even raises challenges in the form of moral crises and weakening of students' self-control (Kadylak & Cotten, 2020). Hurwitz & Schmitt (2020) show that exposure to digital media without value education assistance can weaken the ethical and spiritual dimensions of students. This condition requires the education system to not only emphasize the academic aspect, but also to strengthen character formation in a planned and sustainable manner. Character

education is seen as a strategic approach to answer the challenges of moral degradation in the global and digital era (Hidayat & Subando, 2024). The development of students' character is an important agenda in various education systems in the world, including education based on religious values.

In the context of Islamic education, the formation of religious character is the main goal that cannot be separated from the educational process itself (Sholihah & Maulida, 2020). Religious character is understood as the internalization of faith values which are reflected in the attitudes, behaviors, and daily life habits of students (Thofani et al., 2025). However, research conducted by Fitri Nur Hayati, Suyatno and Edhy Susatya (2022) shows that Islamic Religious Education learning still tends to be oriented towards cognitive aspects and formal rituals rather than the formation of religious character in depth. This condition causes a gap between students' religious knowledge and the religious behavior they display in social life. Religious character education demands a pedagogical approach that emphasizes exemplary, habituation, and contextual internalization of values (Husain et al., 2024). Therefore, strengthening religious character in PAI education requires a learning strategy that is adaptive to the development of the times and the character of students.

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers have a central role in the process of forming students' religious character because teachers are the main figures in internalizing religious values in schools (Hamdan et al., 2021). The role of PAI teachers is not only limited to the delivery of teaching materials, but also includes the function of moral exemplary and spiritual guidance for students (Ansor et al., 2025). Research by Ramadhan et al (2025) explains that the religious attitudes and behaviors of PAI teachers have a significant influence on the formation of students' religious character. Learning strategies that emphasize exemplary and habituation of values have proven to be more effective than the lecture approach alone in religious character education (Mustamin & Wahono, 2020). In addition, the positive quality of teacher-student relations also contributes to the success of internalizing religious values. Thus, PAI teachers are seen as key actors in building students' religious character in a sustainable manner.

Generation Z is a generation that was born and grew up in a digital environment so that it has different characteristics from the previous generation (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Teachers from Generation Z generally have a high level of technological literacy and are used to using digital media in the learning process. Chosiyah et al. (2025) in a study stated that Generation Z teachers tend to build communication patterns that are more open and close to students. A flexible and participatory learning approach is a characteristic of teachers of this generation (Lapidot-Lefler, 2025). However, there is also a view that considers that these characteristics can pose challenges in maintaining the pedagogical authority of teachers. Therefore, the characteristics of Generation Z teachers need to be studied in depth in the context of religious character education (Domínguez-González et al., 2025).

Research on religious character education shows that value-based learning strategies are effective in shaping students' religious behavior (Hayati et al., 2022). Teachers' examples play a dominant role in the internalization of religious values in schools. Research at the secondary school level shows that the use of digital media can support PAI learning if directed appropriately (Septiani Selly Susanti et al., 2024). However, some research still focuses on teachers in general without

distinguishing between generational backgrounds. Research on Generation Z teachers is more conducted in the context of general education, not religious education. Thus, the study of the strategies of PAI Generation Z teachers in forming religious character is still very limited.

Based on the explanation above, this study is directed to examine the strategies of PAI Generation Z teachers in shaping the religious character of students. The main purpose of this study is to identify the form of strategy used by PAI Generation Z teachers in religious character education. In addition, this study aims to analyze the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of the strategy. The research questions are focused on how Generation Z PAI teachers design, implement, and evaluate strategies for the formation of religious character. The novelty of this research lies in the focus of the subject of Generation Z PAI teachers which is still rarely studied in the context of Islamic education. Thus, this research is expected to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of religious character education in the digital era.

Literature Review

Character Education in an Islamic Perspective

Character education is understood as a planned process to instill moral and ethical values so that they are manifested in the attitudes and behaviors of students in a sustainable manner (Purwati et al., 2024). In the context of modern education, character education is positioned as a strategic response to moral crises that arise due to social, cultural, and technological changes in global technology (Kristjánsson, 2021). Character education not only emphasizes the aspect of moral knowing, but also the habituation and internalization of values in students' daily lives (moral action) (Munawarsyah et al., 2024). Therefore, schools are seen as having a moral responsibility to shape the personality of students as a whole through character education that is integrated into all learning activities (Utamirohmahsari, 2024). Thus, the theory of character education was chosen as the main foundation because it is able to explain the relationship between the educational process and the formation of student behavior holistically.

From the perspective of Islamic education, character education is firmly rooted in the concepts of morality, manners, and exemplary as the main goal of education (Mustafa, 2022). Al-Ghazali emphasized that the essence of Islamic education is *tahdzīb al-akhlāq*, which is the process of fostering noble morals that are embedded in students so as to give birth to good behavior consciously and sustainably (Akhmad et al., 2022). Islamic education does not only focus on mastering religious knowledge, but emphasizes the integration between faith, knowledge, and charity in real life (Hayati et al., 2022). The approach to character education in Islam is holistic because it includes the spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of students in an integrated manner (Ahmad Fajar Shodiq et al., 2025). Therefore, the theory of Islamic character education is seen as the most relevant theory to explain the formation of religious character in the context of Islamic Religious Education.

Religious Character of Students

Religious character is the main dimension in character education based on religious values and spirituality (Haryanto, 2024). Religious character is not only interpreted as obedience to ritual worship, but also reflects the quality of faith that is internalized in the attitudes and daily behaviors of students. Religious character is reflected in honest behavior, discipline, responsibility, social concern, and manners in interacting with others (Ambarwati et al., 2023). The formation of religious character requires a long process that involves the habituation of values, the example of educator figures, and continuous religious experience. Therefore, the theory of religious character is seen as

appropriate to explain that the formation of students' religiosity cannot be achieved through a purely cognitive approach (Arifin et al., 2023).

Students with strong religious characters tend to have more positive social and moral behaviors (Hayati et al., 2022). However, the learning practice of Islamic Religious Education in schools still often emphasizes the aspects of memorization and formal rituals rather than the internalization of values. This condition causes a gap between students' religious knowledge and the religious behavior they display in daily life (Elga Yanuardianto et al., 2024). Therefore, religious character education requires a pedagogical approach that is contextual and relevant to the reality of students' lives. Thus, religious character theory is used to bridge the gap between normative and praxic aspects in PAI education.

PAI Teachers Generation Z

In the context of generation, Generation Z PAI teachers have different characteristics compared to previous generations because they grow up in a digital environment (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Generation Z is known to have a high level of technological literacy and is used to the rapid and interactive flow of information. These characteristics affect the way Generation Z PAI teachers interact, communicate, and manage learning in the classroom (Chosiyah et al., 2025). Generation Z PAI teachers tend to apply flexible, adaptive, and contextual learning approaches by utilizing digital technology. Therefore, generation theory is used to explain the differences in pedagogical styles and learning strategies of PAI Generation Z teachers compared to previous generations (Rahman et al., 2024).

In PAI education, the characteristics of Generation Z teachers provide opportunities to convey religious values through a more communicative approach and close to the reality of students (Silviyana et al., 2025). The proximity of age and the similarity of communication styles allows for the establishment of a more intimate relationship between teachers and students, thus supporting the process of religious character education. However, digital culture also presents its own challenges, especially in maintaining pedagogical authority and consistency of teachers' moral examples. Therefore, PAI Generation Z teachers are required to be able to balance relational closeness with value assertiveness and exemplary attitudes (Domínguez-González et al., 2025). Thus, the combination of teacher role theory and generation theory becomes a relevant framework to analyze the strategies of PAI Generation Z teachers in shaping the religious character of students (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to deeply understand the strategies of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers of Generation Z in shaping the religious character of students (John W. Creswell & N. Poth, 2018). The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meaning, experience, and pedagogical practices of teachers in a contextual and holistic manner (Babchuk, 2017). The object of the research is the strategy of forming religious character, while the subject of the research is PAI teachers who are included in the category of Generation Z, namely teachers who were born around 1999-2002 and are actively teaching. The selection of subjects was carried out by purposive sampling technique based on the suitability of the informant's characteristics with the focus of the research (Patton, 2014). The researcher acted as the main instrument with the help of semi-structured interview guidelines as well as recording tools and field notes.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews to obtain rich and comprehensive data related to the strategies of PAI Generation Z teachers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The collected data was analyzed using qualitative data analysis techniques which included the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2019). The

operational definition of the research includes PAI Generation Z teachers as subjects, PAI teachers' strategies as a learning process and value development, and students' religious character as results characterized by religious behavior and positive social attitudes. Data analysis was carried out by associating field findings with the theory of character education, religious character, and generational theory that have been described in the literature review, so that the results of the study have a strong theoretical foundation.

Result and Discussion

Generation Z PAI Teachers' Understanding of the Religious Character of Students

Religious character in PAI education is understood as the internalization of faith values that are reflected in students' attitudes and behaviors in daily life (Ambarwati et al., 2023). This view is reflected in the results of interviews with PAI teachers at the elementary and secondary school levels, who interpret religiosity not only as obedience to ritual worship, but also as honesty, responsibility, politeness, and social concern in daily interactions. This understanding is in line with the research of Zazali, M., & Samiha, Y.T. (2023) showing that PAI teachers view religious character as part of the overall personality formation of students. This indicates a shift in understanding from symbolic religiosity to substantive religiosity. This approach places religious values as a guideline for life, not just a formal obligation.

The meaning of religious character that emphasizes the dimension of social behavior can also be seen from the informant's emphasis on aspects of manners, emotional control, and respect for others. The teacher views that the religiosity of students can be observed through daily habits, such as speaking politely, being honest, and showing empathy for others (PAI Teacher Interview). This understanding is in line with the research of Zainuddin & Muttaqin (2022) who explained that religious character includes the integration of the spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of students. True religiosity is reflected in the consistency of attitudes and behaviors, not just in the implementation of religious rituals. Thus, the results of the interviews show the compatibility between the understanding of PAI teachers and the theoretical framework of contemporary religious character (Ambarwati et al., 2023).

PAI teachers' understanding of religious characters that are contextual has direct implications for the way they view PAI learning objectives. Teachers do not place the success of learning on mastering the material alone, but on changing the attitudes and habits of students. Based on Arifin's research (2023), he explained that religious character education will be more effective if religious values are associated with social reality and students' life experiences. This understanding strengthens PAI's position as a vehicle for character formation, not just the transmission of knowledge. Thus, the teacher's perspective on religious character becomes an important foundation in determining the direction of learning.

In addition, the understanding of Generation Z PAI teachers of religious character also reflects pedagogical awareness of the dynamics of students in the digital era. Teachers realize that students need a dialogical and reflective value approach so that religious teachings can be consciously accepted. This is reflected in the views of informants who emphasize the importance of religious awareness without coercion and gradual habituation of values (PAI Teacher Interview). This understanding is in line with Anwar's (2023) research which shows that the internalization of religious values through active involvement and reflection of students supports the development of empathy, morals, and social interaction of students as a whole. Therefore, PAI teachers' understanding of religious character is not only conceptual, but also pedagogical.

Thus, the understanding of PAI Generation Z teachers on religious character shows a tendency that is in line with the holistic and contextual paradigm of Islamic character education. The teacher's view that emphasizes the integration of spiritual and social values shows that religious character is understood as a long-term personality formation process. Based on research, Berkowitz

and Bier (2021) explained that the quality of teachers' understanding of character values is a determining factor for the success of character education in schools. Therefore, the understanding of religious character possessed by PAI Generation Z teachers can be seen as a strategic pedagogical capital in strengthening students' religious character education.

The Role of Generation Z PAI Teachers in the Formation of Students' Religious Character

The role of PAI teachers in the formation of religious character is understood not only as a conveyor of religious material, but as a figure who has a direct influence on the attitude and behavior of students. This view is reflected in the results of interviews with PAI teachers at the elementary and secondary school levels which emphasized the role of teachers as role models, guides, and companions in the process of internalizing religious values. Teachers view that religious values will be more acceptable when students see the consistency between the teacher's speech and behavior (Zahro et al., 2023). This shows that the role of teachers is personal and relational. Thus, teachers become the main actors in the formation of religious character in schools.

The emphasis on example as the main role of PAI teachers can also be seen from the informant's statement that students tend to imitate the teacher's attitude in daily life. Teachers view example as more effective than mere verbal advice. Based on research by Zahro, Mansur, & Afifullah (2023), it is explained that the example of PAI teachers plays an important role in shaping the religious character of students. Modeling is a very strong value internalization strategy in religious education, because values are not only taught but exemplified and experienced by students in daily educational interactions (Rohani et al., 2023). Therefore, the role of example becomes the main foundation in the practice of religious character education. Therefore, the role of exemplary is the main foundation in the practice of religious character education.

Apart from being an example, PAI Generation Z teachers also position themselves as mentors and discussion friends for students. This approach can be seen from the way teachers build open and dialogical communication, so that students feel comfortable to convey their views and experiences (PAI Teacher Interview). Based on research by Sari & Sutarto (2024), it is shown that the intensive relationship between teachers and students is an important foundation in developing students' character values. Strong teacher-student interaction helps students internalize good, moral and ethical values in real life in school life. Dialogical relationships allow students to understand religious values reflectively. Thus, the role of teachers as dialogue partners strengthens the process of forming religious character.

The role of supervisors carried out by PAI teachers can also be seen from their efforts to assist students in facing moral and social problems. Teachers not only assess students' behavior, but help them reflect on the moral consequences of each action. Based on research, Hidayat and Syahidin (2022) explained that teacher assistance in the process of moral reflection can increase students' religious awareness. This approach shows that religious character education is an ongoing process. Therefore, the role of teachers does not stop at the learning process in the classroom.

Thus, the role of PAI Generation Z teachers in the formation of religious character is multidimensional, including example, guidance, and dialogical relationships. The views and practices of teachers as reflected in the results of the interviews show compatibility with contemporary character education approaches. PAI teachers who carry out their roles in a reflective and relational manner have a great contribution to strengthening the religious character of students. Therefore, the role of PAI Generation Z teachers is a strategic factor in religious character education in schools.

Challenges of Generation Z PAI Teachers in Religious Character Education

Religious character education is inseparable from various challenges that affect the effectiveness of value internalization. This is reflected in the results of interviews with PAI teachers who revealed that there are challenges in the form of the influence of social media, social

environment, and differences in students' family backgrounds (PAI Teacher Interview, 2025). Teachers view that the values taught at school are not always in line with the habits of students outside of school. This condition shows the complexity of the educational context of religious character. Therefore, PAI teachers must deal with dynamic social realities.

The influence of social media is one of the main challenges in the formation of students' religious character in the digital era. PAI teachers realize that digital media has two sides, namely as a potential educational means as well as a source of distraction that can weaken the internalization of religious values if not managed properly. Students who access social media without assistance tend to be exposed to content that is not in harmony with religious values, thus having an impact on declining self-control, worship discipline, and moral sensitivity. This is in line with research by Wijaya & Wisudawati (2024) which shows that the use of social media without supervision contributes to a decrease in religious attitudes and control of students' behavior. Therefore, PAI teachers are required to have adequate digital literacy in order to be able to guide students in using social media wisely and with educational value.

In addition to social media challenges, differences in family backgrounds are also a significant challenge in the formation of students' religious character. PAI teachers often face conditions where religious values instilled in schools are not always strengthened in the family environment. Research by Fadilah & Aprison (2024) shows that parental parenting has a significant relationship with students' religious character, where parental involvement in reminding worship and guiding religious attitudes contributes to increasing students' religiosity. Thus, PAI teachers view the importance of building communication and cooperation with parents to create synergy of value education between schools and families, because school-family partnerships have been proven to strengthen the formation of religious character effectively.

Another challenge faced by PAI teachers, especially from Generation Z, is maintaining pedagogical authority in the midst of the relational approach they build with students. Age proximity and egalitarian and open communication styles often cause the perception of reduced assertiveness of teachers in carrying out the role of educators. In fact, relationships that are too fluid without professional boundaries have the potential to weaken the authority of teachers as exemplary figures. Research by Chosiyah et al., (2025) shows that young teachers need to balance emotional closeness with consistency of attitude and pedagogical firmness in order to remain respected by students. Thus, continuous exemplary and consistent behavior are the key to maintaining the pedagogical authority of PAI teachers in the midst of the dynamics of modern educational relations

Thus, the challenges faced by Generation Z PAI teachers show that religious character education requires a collaborative and sustainable approach. These challenges do not only come from students, but also from the wider social environment. Based on the research of Hakim and Prasetyo (2025), it is explained that the success of religious character education is determined by the involvement of various parties. Therefore, challenges are seen as contexts that need to be managed strategically in PAI education.

Generation Z PAI Teachers' Strategies in Shaping the Religious Character of Students

Learning strategies are an important aspect in religious character education because they determine the effectiveness of internalizing religious values. This is reflected in the results of interviews with PAI teachers who show the use of diverse and contextual strategies, such as worship habits, discussion of moral cases, self-reflection, exemplary attitudes, and the use of digital media (PAI Teacher Interview). The Master views that a single strategy is not enough to form a religious character. Therefore, strategies are designed flexibly according to the character of students. This approach shows the pedagogical awareness of PAI Generation Z teachers.

The habit of worship is seen as a basic strategy in shaping the religious character of students. The teacher emphasized the importance of prayer routines, congregational prayers, and

religious activities as a means of forming positive habits. Based on research by Rohani et al., (2023) explains that consistent worship habits contribute to strengthening students' religious attitudes. However, teachers also realize that habituation needs to be accompanied by meaning so that it is not formalistic. Thus, habituation is positioned as a long-term process.

Dialogical and reflective strategies are also important approaches used by PAI Generation Z teachers. This approach allows students to understand religious values contextually (PAI Teacher Interviews). Niken, Dea and Mahbubi (2025) in their research on the application of discussion methods in Islamic Religious Education learning shows that discussions encourage students to think critically, express opinions, and reflect on the values learned in the context of real life. The discussion process opens up space for moral reflection and the deeper meaning of religious values. This is strengthened by the research of Ridwan, Abdurrohman, and Mustofa (2023) who stated that interactive discussions in PAI learning help students relate religious teachings to social reality, so that the internalization of religious values is not verbalistic, but reflective and applicative. Therefore, dialogue is a means of internalizing effective values in Islamic religious education.

The use of digital media is a typical strategy for Generation Z PAI teachers in forming religious characters. Teachers use educational videos, exemplary stories, and Islamic content as learning media. Based on research, Putri and Nugroho (2023) explain that digital media can increase student involvement in PAI learning if directed appropriately. This strategy shows that technology is used as a means of strengthening values, not a threat to religiosity. Thus, digital strategies are an integral part of religious character education.

Thus, the strategies of PAI Generation Z teachers in forming religious characters are adaptive, integrative, and contextual. The strategy reflects teachers' efforts in adapting learning to the character of students in the digital era. Based on research, Rahman and Aziz (2024) explain that learning strategy innovation is the key to the success of religious character education. Therefore, the strategy of PAI Generation Z teachers has high relevance in the development of character education in schools.

Conclusion

The above discussion concluded that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Generation Z teachers have a holistic understanding of the religious character of students, which is not only interpreted as ritual obedience, but also as the integration of spiritual, moral, and social values in daily behavior. This understanding is the basis for designing and implementing adaptive and contextual learning strategies. The main strategies used include exemplary attitudes, worship habits, dialogical-reflective approaches, discussion of moral cases, and the use of digital media as a means of internalizing religious values. This finding answers the purpose of the research by showing that the characteristics of PAI Generation Z teachers are actually pedagogical capital in religious character education in the digital era.

The discussion also found that the success of the PAI Generation Z teacher strategy is supported by digital literacy, close teacher-student relationships, and pedagogical awareness of students' social dynamics. Nevertheless, challenges remain, especially from the influence of social media, differences in family backgrounds, and the need to maintain a balance between relational closeness and pedagogical authority. Therefore, it is recommended that strengthening religious character education be carried out through collaboration between schools, families, and the social environment. The next research is expected to expand the subject and context of the research, as well as examine the effectiveness of the longitudinal strategies of PAI Generation Z teachers to enrich the development of theory and practice of religious character education in Indonesia.

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