

Character-Based Combination Curriculum Management: Strategies and Their Impact on Graduate Quality at SMP Negeri 18 Lebong

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ABSTRACT

The quality of graduates serves as a central benchmark in evaluating educational outcomes at the secondary school level. In contemporary educational contexts, graduate quality encompasses not only academic attainment but also the moral integrity and spiritual values demonstrated by students in daily life. This study aims to investigate the implementation of combined curriculum management grounded in religious character education at SMP Negeri 18 Lebong, identify the strategies applied in embedding religious values within curriculum governance, and assess their influence on graduate quality. Although prior research has examined religious character education and combined curricula as separate strands, few studies have investigated how combined curriculum management functions as an integrative strategy for embedding religious values and its measurable impact on graduate quality; this study addresses that gap and offers novel empirical evidence for curriculum governance in secondary education. A qualitative case study design was employed, engaging the school principal, vice principal for curriculum affairs, classroom teachers, and students as research participants. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, structured observations, and document analysis, and subsequently analysed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data credibility was ensured through source and method triangulation, member checking, and audit trail procedures. Findings reveal that combined curriculum

management integrating religious character was enacted through the development of religiously informed curriculum plans, instructional practices that connect academic content with moral principles, and systematic habituation programs such as IMTAQ activities, congregational Dhuhr prayer, and Dhuha prayer. These initiatives contributed to measurable improvements in graduate quality across academic performance, character development, and social behaviour. The study concludes that systematically embedding religious values into curriculum management constitutes a strategic framework for elevating educational outcomes and cultivating a character-oriented school culture. These findings carry practical implications for curriculum developers, school leaders, and educational policymakers in designing religiously grounded, character-oriented curriculum governance models applicable to similar school contexts.

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Introduction

Changes in curriculum policy within the national education system are an inevitable dynamic that educational institutions cannot avoid (Ananda and Rifa 2025). The transition from the 2013 Curriculum to the Merdeka Curriculum has introduced a new paradigm in learning management that is more adaptive, contextual, and oriented toward strengthening students' character.(E. Sari and Hanif 2026). In practice, however, not all schools have fully abandoned the previous curriculum system. Some institutions instead adopt a combination curriculum pattern, blending elements of the 2013 Curriculum with the Merdeka Curriculum according to their institutional capacity and readiness. This phenomenon reflects the fact that curriculum implementation is contextual and adaptive, depending on each school's management capability to manage it effectively (L. D. Yusuf 2025).

Graduate quality is one of the most crucial indicators for assessing the effectiveness of education at the secondary school level (Suryanto, Hendrowati, and Badrun 2025). Schools are

required not only to produce academically excellent students but also individuals with strong character, moral integrity, and social responsibility. In the contemporary education paradigm, graduate quality is no longer measured solely by cognitive attainment but also by students' ability to implement moral and spiritual values in daily life (Indra, Gunawan, and Usman 2022). Technological development, globalisation, and accelerating social change also present significant challenges for educational institutions in producing graduates who are not only intellectually capable but also of good character (Fuad and Khaudli 2025). Therefore, efforts to improve graduate quality need to be carried out systematically through effective educational governance that is oriented toward the sustainable formation of students' character.

One strategy considered relevant for improving graduate quality is integrating religious character education into the school curriculum framework (Asiah et al. 2025). Religious character education plays a fundamental role in shaping students' value orientation, attitudes, and behaviour grounded in moral and spiritual principles.(Safirah et al. 2025) . Religious values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and social concern can serve as a foundation for building students' personalities holistically (Asiah et al. 2025). In practice, the internalisation of religious values cannot be achieved through classroom learning activities alone but must also be realised through school culture and various programs that support holistic character formation.(Farleni et al. 2023). In this context, curriculum management plays a crucial role in planning, organising, and implementing various educational programs capable of systematically and sustainably integrating religious character values (Sorfina and Hidayati 2025).

Although studies on character education and its implementation in schools have been fairly extensive, most of this research, both in the Indonesian and the broader international literature, still concentrates on the implementation of character programs within classroom instruction or extracurricular activities in isolation. International studies similarly tend to examine religious or values-based education and curriculum management as separate strands rather than as an integrated system, leaving the specific dimension of combination curriculum management as a primary strategy for integrating religious character values, and its effect on graduate quality, largely underexplored in the education literature. This research gap highlights the need for a more in-depth examination of how combination curriculum management strategies can be optimised as a vehicle for integrating religious values while simultaneously improving graduate quality at the junior secondary school level, which constitutes the novelty and central contribution of the present study.

This research is expected to make both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of educational management studies. Theoretically, this study aims to enrich the

discourse on curriculum management, particularly regarding the integration of religious character values in the management of combination curricula in schools. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a concrete reference for school principals, teachers, and education policymakers in designing and implementing curriculum governance capable of effectively integrating religious character education into all dimensions of school life, thereby strengthening curriculum development practices and informing educational policy.

Based on the description above, this study is directed at answering three main questions: (1) How is combination curriculum management based on religious character implemented at SMP Negeri 18 Lebong? (2) What strategies are applied to integrate religious character values into curriculum management? (3) What is the impact of religious character-based combination curriculum management on graduate quality at the school?

Literature Review

Curriculum Management in Schools

Curriculum management can be understood as a series of systematic curriculum management processes encompassing planning, organising, implementing, and evaluating to achieve educational goals effectively and efficiently (Lazwardi 2017). Within the institutional context of education, the curriculum is not merely regarded as a collection of subjects but as a comprehensive instrument that directs the entirety of learning activities in schools. (R. Sari, Munastiwi, and Rohmah 2025) Operationally, curriculum management encompasses four main functions: planning, organising, implementing, and evaluating (Dr. Mohammad Zaini 2020). These four functions work synergistically to ensure that the implemented learning programs achieve the established objectives, while also opening space for continuous curriculum improvement and development.

Religious Character Education

Religious character education is a process of shaping students' attitudes, values, and behaviour grounded in religious principles (Fahrudin 2025). This education aims not only to instil cognitive understanding of religious teachings but also to shape students' morality and spirituality so that they can live in accordance with religious norms and social values (Ningsih, Basyari, and Rohaeni 2025) In practice, religious values are not taught exclusively within religious subjects but are integrated into various learning activities and the school culture. (Ningsih, Basyari, and Rohaeni 2025). These values encompass the dimensions of honesty, discipline, responsibility, mutual respect, and social concern, which are internalised through consistent and structured habituation within the school environment.

Combination Curriculum and Integrative Curriculum

Within the context of dynamic education policy development, the concept of a combination curriculum emerges as an adaptive response by educational institutions to ongoing changes (Ningsih, Basyari, and Rohaeni 2025). A combination curriculum can be understood as a strategy for merging two different curriculum models while maintaining alignment of objectives, learning structure, and student needs. (Fahrudin 2025) Furthermore, an integrative curriculum is a model that combines various dimensions of learning, both academic and character values, so that the educational process takes place more holistically (Munawwarah, Iis Marsithah, Sri Maharany, Siti Sara Rizkia 2025). Within the framework of religious character education, an integrative curriculum allows religious values not merely to be taught separately but to be integrated into various subjects and educational activities, so that students can understand and apply them contextually in daily life. (Nasution and Syahada 2025).

Graduate Quality in Educational Perspective

Graduate quality is the outcome of the entire educational process conducted by the school. Indicators of graduate quality encompass not only academic ability but also students' skills, attitudes, and character as whole individuals (Mutu and Dan 2024). From the perspective of modern education, quality graduates are those who possess a balance between intellectual competence, social skills, and a strong moral foundation as provisions for life in society (Sorfina and Hidayati 2025). Therefore, the integration of religious character education into the curriculum is expected to contribute to the formation of graduates who excel not only academically but also possess strong character and integrity (Rahmadayanti and Agung Hartoyo 2022).

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design (*qualitative case study*). This approach was selected because the study aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of how religious character-based combination curriculum management is implemented in actual school practice and how it affects graduate quality. Through the case study design, the researchers were able to explore the phenomenon comprehensively within its natural context, so that various aspects related to curriculum management, the integration of religious character values, and educational outcomes could be analysed in depth and holistically.

Research Setting

This study was conducted at SMP Negeri 18 Lebong over a period of approximately three months, encompassing preliminary observation, in-depth data collection, and data verification. The

site was selected because the school had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum in its learning process while, in practice, still combining a number of elements from the previous curriculum. In addition, the school has a variety of programs related to the formation of students' religious character that are integrated into both learning activities and school culture. These conditions make SMP Negeri 18 Lebong a relevant and representative site for examining the implementation of religious character-based combination curriculum management.

Research Participants

Participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique, based on the criterion that they were directly involved in, and possessed substantive knowledge of, the planning, implementation, or lived experience of religious character-based combination curriculum management at the school. The participants comprised the school principal, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, classroom teachers, and several students directly involved in curriculum management and implementation. The principal and the vice principal for curriculum affairs were selected because they hold the authority and responsibility for curriculum planning and management. Teachers were involved because they serve as the frontline implementers of the curriculum in classroom learning, while students were included to obtain a picture of their experiences participating in a learning process that integrates religious character values. All participants took part voluntarily after providing informed consent, and the study was conducted in accordance with the research ethics procedures required by the researchers' institution.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this study was carried out through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and teachers to explore information regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of religious character-based curriculum management. Observation was conducted to directly observe the learning process and various school activities related to the integration of religious values. Documentation was used as a supporting data source, including curriculum documents, lesson plans, school programs, and other relevant documents.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis employed the interactive analysis model developed by Miles and Huberman, consisting of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, 1994). At the data reduction stage, the information obtained was selected, simplified, and focused in accordance with the research problem. Next, the reduced data were presented in the form of a descriptive narrative to facilitate understanding of the patterns

and relationships among the data. The final stage was conclusion drawing, carried out gradually and continuously throughout the research process.

Data Validity

The validity of the research data was ensured through the application of several validation techniques, namely triangulation, *member checking*, and *audit trail*. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data from various sources and using multiple data collection techniques to verify the consistency of information. *Member checking* was carried out by reconfirming the interview results and data interpretations with the participants to ensure that the findings genuinely reflected actual field conditions. The audit trail was conducted by systematically and transparently documenting the entire research process, so that the flow of data collection and analysis could be traced and accounted for (Sugiyono 2013)

Result

Religious Character-Based Curriculum Planning

The research findings indicate that curriculum planning at SMP Negeri 18 Lebong has systematically integrated religious character values into various aspects of educational planning. This integration is reflected in the stages of school program development, learning planning, and the development of activities that support students' character formation. In the curriculum planning process, the school does not focus solely on achieving academic competence but consciously seeks to instil religious values as an integral part of the intended educational goals.

The integration of religious values into curriculum planning is realised through the development of school programs that include various religious activities and the habituation of religious behaviour in daily life within the school environment. These programs are designed through coordination involving the principal, the vice principal for curriculum affairs, and all teachers, taking into account students' characteristics as well as the school's vision and mission, which emphasise the importance of religious character formation.

Curriculum Implementation Strategy

At the implementation stage, the school applies various strategies to comprehensively integrate religious values into the educational process. The first strategy is integrating religious values into the various existing subjects. Teachers seek to connect learning materials with relevant moral and religious values, so that students not only understand academic concepts but are also able to internalise these values in their daily behaviour.

In addition to classroom learning activities, the school also conducts various religious habituation programs as part of curriculum implementation. These habituation programs include communal prayer before and after lessons, IMTAQ activities held biweekly, congregational Dhuhr prayer, and Dhuha prayer. This habituation is carried out consistently, transforming it into part of the school's cultural identity that distinguishes it from other educational institutions.

Another strategy applied is the development of religious extracurricular activities. Through these activities, students gain a venue to develop a deeper understanding and practice of religion, while also developing social skills, leadership, and cooperation among peers.

Curriculum Evaluation

Curriculum evaluation is an important component in ensuring that the implemented educational program achieves its established objectives. Based on the research findings, evaluation of the religious character education program is conducted periodically by the school through various mechanisms. The evaluation process is carried out through observation of student behaviour, reflective discussions between teachers and school leadership, and assessment of the implementation of planned programs. The principal plays a crucial role in continuously monitoring the implementation of the curriculum program to ensure that the integration of religious values proceeds in accordance with the planned objectives.

Impact on Graduate Quality

The research findings indicate that the implementation of religious character-based combination curriculum management has a real positive impact on graduate quality across three main dimensions.

First, from the academic dimension, the integration of religious values in learning has been shown to increase students' learning motivation and create a more conducive learning atmosphere. Students demonstrated a significant increase in discipline and a sense of responsibility toward their learning process.

Second, from the character dimension, the implemented religious character education program was able to shape positive attitudes and behaviour among students. Values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and mutual respect became increasingly internalised and formed part of students' daily behaviour within the school environment.

Third, from the social behaviour dimension, students displayed an improved ability to interact positively with peers and teachers. They tended to show greater concern for their social environment and better cooperative skills in various school activities.

Discussion

Implementation of Religious Character-Based Combination Curriculum Management

The research findings confirm that curriculum management at SMP Negeri 18 Lebong is not oriented solely toward the achievement of academic competence but also toward the strengthening of religious character values as an integral element of the educational process. This is consistent with the view of (Izzah et al. 2024) who assert that character-based curriculum management requires a well-planned strategy on the part of the principal to integrate religious values into every dimension of curriculum management.

The regular biweekly implementation of IMTAQ activities is one concrete manifestation of this implementation. This activity serves as a venue for students' spiritual development through the delivery of religious material, recitation of scripture, and the reinforcement of moral values. Consistent with this finding, (Fahrudin 2025) in a study on the management of religious character education found that systematically scheduled spiritual development programs contribute significantly to building students' religious awareness.

Communal worship practices, such as congregational Dhuhr prayer and Dhuha prayer, also constitute an important component of religious character-based curriculum implementation. These activities carry not only a devotional dimension but also profound educational value, particularly in cultivating students' discipline, responsibility, and spiritual awareness. A curriculum management perspective indicates that these activities affirm that the strengthening of religious character is achieved not only through formal instruction but also through habituation integrated into the school culture. (M. Yusuf and Fitriyono 2026).

Strategy for Integrating Religious Character Values

The research findings also reveal that the integration of religious character values into combined curriculum management is carried out through a multi-strategy and comprehensive approach. The integration of religious values into classroom learning is the first and most prominent strategy. Teachers not only deliver material in accordance with curriculum requirements but also actively connect it with moral and religious values relevant to students' lives. This finding is consistent with the study of (Lumbanbatu et al. 2026) who found that core-values-based school development contributes to both character formation and academic achievement simultaneously.

Religious habituation programs conducted regularly and in a structured manner constitute the second strategy identified in this study. IMTAQ activities, congregational prayer, and various other religious programs provide students with the opportunity not only to acquire knowledge of religious values but also to practice them directly. This process is important because the

internalisation of values cannot occur through the mere transmission of knowledge but requires experience and practice carried out continuously and consistently.

Thus, the strategy for integrating religious character values into combination curriculum management at this school reflects an integrated approach that simultaneously encompasses the cognitive, affective, and practical dimensions. This approach allows religious values to be understood not merely as abstract concepts but to become part of students' habitus and daily habits within the school environment.

Influence on Graduate Quality

These findings also affirm that the implementation of religious character-based combination curriculum management has meaningful implications for improving graduate quality. From the academic side, a school environment that consistently emphasises religious values tends to create a more conducive learning climate, in which students demonstrate higher levels of discipline and academic responsibility. This finding is consistent with the research of (Warta et al. 2025) who confirm that character-based curriculum management in elementary schools contributes to improved academic achievement and the formation of positive student behaviour.

In terms of character formation, various religious activities implemented systematically contribute to shaping students' spiritual and moral attitudes. Values such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline, which emerge as a consequence of religious habituation programs, become gradually yet consistently internalised in students' daily behaviour. Meanwhile, from the social dimension, the religious values instilled encourage students to develop mutual respect, concern for others, and the ability to build more positive and constructive social relationships (Asiah et al. 2025)

Conclusion

Based on the research results and discussion presented above, it can be concluded that religious character-based combination curriculum management at SMP Negeri 18 Lebong is implemented through curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation processes that systematically integrate religious values across various dimensions of educational activity. This integration is manifested not only in formal classroom learning but also in various religious habituation programs that have become part of the school's cultural identity, such as biweekly IMTAQ activities, congregational Dhuhr prayer, and Dhuha prayer.

This study also identifies that the integration of religious character values is carried out through comprehensive strategies, including the integration of religious values into learning materials across subjects, the structured and consistent implementation of religious habituation

programs, and the development of religious extracurricular activities. These strategies allow religious values to be not only conceptually understood but also practised concretely and sustainably in students' daily lives within the school environment.

Furthermore, the research findings show that the implementation of religious character-based combination curriculum management makes a significant contribution to improving graduate quality across three main dimensions: academic, character, and social behaviour. An educational environment that consistently emphasises religious values has been shown to foster discipline, responsibility, and social concern among students. This study therefore affirms that curriculum governance that systematically integrates religious character values constitutes an effective strategic framework for improving graduate quality while simultaneously building a character-based educational ecosystem within schools.

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