

Mapping the Current Practice of Religious Character Education Management Based on Islamic Religious Education: A Multi-Case Study in Islamic Elementary Schools in Balikpapan City, Indonesia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Religious character education;
educational management;
Islamic Religious Education;
Islamic elementary school;
needs analysis

Article history:

Received 2026-05-08

Revised 2026-06-07

Accepted 2026-07-13

ABSTRACT

Religious character education based on Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays an important role in strengthening students' moral and spiritual development. However, evidence regarding its management in Islamic elementary schools remains limited. This study aims to describe the management of IRE-based religious character education in three Islamic elementary schools in Balikpapan City, Indonesia, through five management functions: planning, organizing, actuating, controlling, and innovation. A descriptive qualitative multi-case study was conducted as the preliminary needs analysis stage of a broader research and development project. Data were collected through interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving principals, IRE teachers, and parents. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model with credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability procedures. The findings indicate that religious habituation programs, including congregational prayer, Qur'an memorization, and character-building activities, have been implemented in all schools. However, these programs are managed as routine activities rather than as an integrated management system. Planning remains normative without systematic needs assessment, organizing depends largely on IRE teachers, controlling lacks standardized evaluation instruments, and innovation is limited and unsustainable. Cross-case analysis also reveals weak collaboration between schools and families in reinforcing religious character, especially during school holidays. The study concludes that an integrated, evidence-based management model is needed to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of religious character education in Islamic elementary schools.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational management occupies a central position in ensuring that the process of schooling translates policy, strategy, and follow-up plans into an integrated system that supports the achievement of educational goals (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Within this broader field, the management of character education has become an increasingly salient concern, as schools are expected not merely to transmit knowledge but to cultivate students who are pious, disciplined, and socially responsible. Character education itself is understood as a deliberate and systematic process of nurturing moral and ethical qualities in learners, and its success depends heavily on how well schools plan, organize, implement, monitor, and continuously refine the programs designed to instill those qualities.

Among the various dimensions of character, religious character occupies a distinctive place in the younger generation capable of facing the ethical challenges of a rapidly changing society Indonesian context, where Islamic Religious Education (IRE, or Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) is a compulsory subject intended to cultivate faith, piety, and religiously grounded behavior among Muslim students. IRE and its accompanying life-skills orientation are widely regarded as instrumental in shaping a morally accountable (Bahansubu et al., 2023). In practice, however, IRE instruction time in the national curriculum is limited, and religious character formation is frequently reduced to a set of routine ritual activities—congregational prayer, Qur'an recitation, and short religious talks—rather than being treated as an outcome of deliberate, evidence-based management. Comparative studies on Islamic education management confirm that religious institutions often struggle to move beyond ritual habituation toward a genuinely systemic approach to character formation, and that success is highly contingent on leadership commitment, teacher competence, and school–family collaboration (Cahyanto et al., 2024; Lubis, 2018). Similarly, quality-management studies in Islamic educational institutions emphasize that without deliberate managerial planning and monitoring, values-based programs tend to remain informal and highly dependent on individual initiative rather than institutional design (Ikhwan, 2017).

Recent literature reinforces the importance—yet also the persistent limitations—of religious habituation strategies in Islamic schools. Studies on the integration of religious character into school culture report that congregational prayer, dhuha prayer, and Qur'anic recitation are effective entry points for value internalization, but their impact depends on consistent teacher modeling and active family involvement, both of which are frequently inconsistent in practice (Bela & Santosa, 2023; Nurizah & Amrullah, 2024). Habituation-based approaches, including routine worship practice and storytelling drawn from Qur'anic narratives, have likewise been shown to reinforce religious character when implemented consistently within the everyday school environment (Ahsanul Khaq, 2019; Husin et al., 2023; Rosad, 2019). Likewise, research on parental engagement in religious habituation shows that inconsistent parental involvement and limited facilities remain significant barriers to sustaining religious values once students leave the school environment (Miftahurrohman et al., 2024). A systematic review of character education strategies further identifies teacher training and the absence of structured character-evaluation systems as persistent, cross-national implementation challenges (Hadi et al., 2025). These findings collectively suggest that although religious and character habituation practices are widespread, they are seldom examined through the lens of formal management functions—planning, organizing, actuating, controlling, and innovation—which is precisely the gap this study addresses.

In Balikpapan City, East Kalimantan, this gap is compounded by the absence of a standardized reference model. Preliminary observation indicates that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the local Education Office have not yet established a shared concept for managing religious character education based on IRE, and that output standards—such as the depth of Qur'an memorization achieved through each school's own methods—are not uniformly controlled across institutions. IRE teachers, for their part, have generally not received structured training in strategies for implementing religious character education, and no operational guideline exists to support consistent

implementation across Islamic elementary schools in the city. Consequently, Islamic elementary schools have developed their own religious programs independently, with considerable variation in scope, intensity, and managerial rigor.

Given this context, the present study seeks to answer one central question: how is religious character education based on IRE currently managed in Islamic elementary schools in Balikpapan City, when examined through the five classical functions of management—planning, organizing, actuating, controlling, and innovation? Addressing this question is important for two reasons. First, it provides an empirically grounded needs analysis that can serve as the diagnostic basis for developing a validated management model—a step recommended by prior research but rarely undertaken through a structured, function-based mapping. Second, it contributes to the theoretical literature on Islamic educational management by demonstrating, with cross-case evidence, precisely where and why routine religious habituation activities fail to mature into a coherent managerial system for character formation.

2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a multi-case (multi-site) case study design, positioned as the preliminary, need-analysis stage of a broader research and development (R&D) study following the Borg and Gall model (Sugiyono, 2009). At this stage, the purpose was not to test or validate a product, but to obtain a rich, contextual description of how religious character education based on IRE is currently managed in practice, which subsequently informs model development.

The research was conducted at three Islamic elementary schools in Balikpapan City: SDIT Balikpapan Islamic School (SDIT BIS), SDIT Istiqamah Balikpapan, and SD Islam Al-Azhar 58 Balikpapan. These three schools were purposively selected because each represents a distinct institutional profile—an independent Islamic integrated school, a foundation-based Islamic integrated school, and a nationally affiliated Islamic school network—thereby allowing the study to capture variation in how religious character management is practiced across different organizational contexts within the same city.

Research subjects comprised IRE teachers, school principals, and parents of students at the three schools, selected as key informants capable of providing information on the planning, organization, implementation, supervision, and innovation of religious character programs. Data were collected through four complementary techniques: (1) participant and non-participant observation of daily religious habituation activities; (2) semi-structured, in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, and parents; (3) documentation of school planning documents, activity schedules, and evaluation records; and (4) triangulation of sources, methods, and time to strengthen the validity of findings (Sugiyono, 2014).

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, carried out both prior to and throughout fieldwork. To establish trustworthiness, the study applied four criteria commonly used in qualitative inquiry: credibility (achieved through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and re-verification of data across techniques), transferability (achieved through thick, theory-grounded description of findings), dependability (achieved through external auditing of the research process), and confirmability (achieved by presenting findings back to informants and relevant stakeholders for confirmation). The analytical framework organizing the findings follows the five classical functions of management—planning, organizing, actuating, controlling, and innovation—consistent with the conceptual foundation used throughout the broader research program from which this study is drawn.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Across all three schools, religious character education based on IRE is realized through a range of habituation programs: at SDIT BIS through the Prophet's-biography (siroh nabi) sessions, Qur'an reading using the UMMI method, the Super Talent program, congregational prayer, and parenting classes; at SDIT Istiqamah through the ibadah-awareness program, Monday–Thursday fasting for upper-grade students, tahajud prayer, character-building lessons, and the P4I student-profile program; and at SD Islam Al-Azhar 58 through Qur'anic Religious Education (PAQ), congregational dhuha and dzuhur prayer, student-led short sermons (kultum), and parenting classes. When these practices are examined through the lens of the five management functions, however, a consistent pattern of managerial weakness emerges across all three sites.

3.1 Planning

In all three schools, religious programs are listed in annual school work plans, but this planning process is normative rather than evidence-based: none of the schools conducted a measurable needs analysis of students' actual character conditions prior to designing their programs. As a result, character targets are formulated in general, qualitative terms rather than as measurable indicators, and planning tends to function as a checklist of activities rather than as a strategy grounded in diagnosed needs. This finding is consistent with broader critiques of character education implementation, which identify the absence of structured evaluation and needs-based planning as a persistent, cross-context barrier (Hadi et al., 2025).

3.2 Organizing

Although each school possesses a formal academic and religious-affairs structure, responsibility for religious character formation remains concentrated on IRE teachers, with no dedicated unit or cross-functional team formally tasked with managing character education as a distinct organizational function. Coordination with parents and school committees tends to be incidental rather than institutionalized. This centralization of responsibility mirrors findings from other Islamic school contexts, where character and religious-culture management is most effective when it becomes a collective institutional commitment rather than the burden of a single subject teacher (Cahyanto et al., 2024). A comparable case study of principal leadership in an Islamic elementary school likewise found that the effectiveness of religious character programs depends heavily on the principal's capacity to organize cross-role collaboration among teachers, particularly in a disruptive educational era that demands rapid institutional adaptation (Muslim et al., 2023); the present findings indicate that this organizational capacity has not yet been fully realized at any of the three schools studied.

3.3 Actuating

Implementation is the strongest of the five functions across all three schools: congregational prayer, Qur'anic recitation, memorization targets, and daily supplications are conducted consistently and have become embedded routines. However, these practices remain concentrated in the ritual-worship dimension and have not been systematically extended into the social dimension of religious character—honesty, empathy, cooperation, and responsibility in daily interaction. Non-IRE teachers, in particular, have not been equipped to integrate religious values into their own subject instruction, leaving character formation compartmentalized rather than pervasive across the curriculum. This resonates with studies showing that religious habituation is most effective for value internalization only when it is reinforced consistently across the whole school culture, not confined to designated religious activities (Bela & Santosa, 2023; Nurizah & Amrullah, 2024). The routine practice of congregational dhuha prayer observed at all three schools is consistent with prior evidence that regular, jointly performed worship strengthens student discipline and religious character more effectively than occasional or voluntary practice (Saryadi et al., 2020), reinforcing the conclusion that

the schools' habituation activities are conceptually well-founded even though they are not yet managerially integrated.

3.4 Controlling

None of the three schools has a standardized instrument for assessing students' religious-character development. Evaluation is largely descriptive and subjective, typically limited to recording participation or memorization achievement rather than measuring behavioral internalization. Consequently, schools lack a documented basis for evidence-based program improvement. A particularly salient cross-case finding is the erosion of religious habits during school holidays: because no monitoring mechanism extends into the home environment, students' religious practices weaken markedly once direct school supervision ends—a continuity gap also reported in studies of parental involvement in religious habituation, where inconsistent parental engagement is identified as a primary threat to sustained value internalization (Miftahurrohman et al., 2024).

3.5 Innovation

Each school has introduced innovative elements—such as the Qur'an Learning Center involving parents at SDIT BIS, the P4I student-profile program at SDIT Istiqamah, and the integration of Qur'anic writing instruction at SD Islam Al-Azhar 58—yet these innovations emerge reactively, in response to situational needs, rather than as part of a deliberate, sustained innovation strategy embedded in the school's managerial cycle. Technology, in particular, remains underused as a tool for monitoring or reinforcing religious character beyond the school gate. Structured mentoring schemes, shown elsewhere to strengthen religious-character coaching by pairing students with consistent adult guidance over time (Sa'adah & Pamungkas, 2022), represent one form of innovation that none of the three schools has yet institutionalized as a continuous program.

3.6 Cross-Case Synthesis

Taken together, the three cases reveal a common structural condition: all three schools demonstrate genuine institutional commitment and a rich variety of religious activities, yet none has integrated planning, organizing, actuating, controlling, and innovation into a single, coherent managerial system for religious character education. Programs are managed in isolation from one another, evaluation is not evidence-based, and the link between school-based habituation and home-based reinforcement remains structurally weak. This pattern corroborates and extends prior research on Islamic school culture, which similarly finds that while individual habituation strategies are well-documented as effective in principle, their translation into a comprehensive, well-governed character-education system is far less common in practice (Lubis, 2018; Suardin et al., 2023). The present findings sharpen this insight by showing precisely which management function is weakest at each stage, thereby offering a diagnostic map rather than a general observation of insufficiency.

These findings carry two implications. Theoretically, they demonstrate that the challenges long associated with character education implementation—normative planning, teacher-dependent execution, weak evaluation—are not merely pedagogical shortcomings but management shortcomings, best understood and addressed through the lens of formal management functions rather than curriculum design alone. Practically, they indicate that Islamic elementary schools in Balikpapan City, and by extension similar institutions elsewhere in Indonesia, require a validated, IRE-based management model that explicitly synchronizes needs-based planning, collective organizational responsibility, holistic (not merely ritual) implementation, standardized controlling instruments, and sustained innovation—precisely the gap that the subsequent stage of this research program addresses through model development and validation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to describe the current practice of religious character education management based on Islamic Religious Education in three Islamic elementary schools in Balikpapan City, using the five management functions of planning, organizing, actuating, controlling, and innovation as an analytical framework. The findings show that although all three schools implement a variety of religious habituation programs with genuine institutional commitment, these programs are managed as isolated, ritual-centered activities rather than as an integrated managerial system: planning lacks a measurable needs analysis, organizing remains centered on individual IRE teachers, actuating is strong in worship rituals but weak in social-value internalization, controlling lacks standardized evaluation instruments, and innovation is reactive rather than sustained. A recurring cross-case weakness is the discontinuity between school-based habituation and home-based reinforcement, most visible in the decline of religious practice during school holidays.

These findings confirm that the persistent gap in religious character education is fundamentally managerial rather than merely programmatic, reinforcing the case for developing an evidence-based, IRE-grounded management model that explicitly integrates all five functions into a single, accountable system. Such a model would benefit IRE teachers as an implementation guideline, school leaders as a governance framework, and local education and religious authorities as a reference for policy and teacher professional development. Broader strategic-development studies in Islamic education similarly argue that sustained institutional competitiveness depends on the ability of schools to translate values-based programs into clearly governed, continuously improved strategies rather than isolated activities (Zakariyah, 2024), underscoring the relevance of the proposed model beyond the three schools studied here. This study is limited to three schools within a single city and relies primarily on qualitative description; future research is encouraged to test the transferability of these findings across broader institutional and regional contexts, and to proceed toward the development and empirical validation of an integrated management model grounded in the needs identified here.

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