



Developing an Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem for Religious Character Development

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Abstract

This study examines how an Islamic organic education ecosystem contributes to students' religious character development. The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 informants, eight weeks of participant observation, and document analysis. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, with data trustworthiness established based on the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba. The findings identified four interconnected dimensions: the school's religious culture as a hidden curriculum; the integration of the *Smart Surau* programs as contextual Islamic educational practices; student participation through *mubadharah*, *didikan subuh*, and religious competitions; and the development of religious discipline toward self-regulation. These dimensions indicate that religious character development occurs through the integration of habituation, role modeling, participation, social relationships, and community involvement. Based on these findings, the study proposes the Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem (IOEE) as a conceptual construct that integrates organic education, hidden curriculum, religious practices, and the educational community within an interconnected framework. This construct provides a perspective for understanding religious character development as an outcome of interactions among multiple components within an Islamic educational ecosystem.

INTRODUCTION

Religious character development in Islamic schools is not only concerned with the transmission of religious knowledge but also with how Islamic values are internalized in students' ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Many Islamic schools in Indonesia have developed Islamic Education, Quranic memorization programs, religious habituation, and various religious activities. However, the presence of such programs does not necessarily ensure that the values learned through formal instruction become part of students' everyday behavior. This issue indicates that value internalization is influenced not only by curriculum content but also by school culture, social relationships, role modeling, the physical environment, and consistent habituation embedded in students' daily school experiences.

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This issue has long been addressed in character education research. Bates (2019) explains that effective character education involves three interconnected dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Thus, mastery of moral knowledge does not necessarily indicate the development of moral behavior. Datu et al (2024) also found that antisocial behavior, including cyberbullying, may persist among students even when they receive intensive formal education. This finding indicates a gap between the teaching of values and their internalization in behavior, suggesting that character development requires an approach that extends beyond increasing instructional content or learning time.

Research on religious character development in Indonesian Islamic schools has expanded in recent years. However, a number of studies have continued to examine religious programs as relatively separate units of analysis, such as the effectiveness of memorization, the benefits of congregational prayer, or activities commemorating Islamic religious events (Kalsum & Khoerudin, 2026; Nafilah et al., 2025; Romadhoni et al., 2023). These approaches provide important information about the contribution of individual programs but do not fully explain how different components of school life operate simultaneously in the process of character development. A broader question concerns how school culture, teacher–student relationships, leadership, the physical environment, religious programs, and daily habituation interact in shaping students’ educational experiences. Craig & Flores (2020) introduced the concept of the hidden curriculum to explain that students also learn values and patterns of behavior through institutional experiences, routines, and atmospheres that are not always formally articulated in the curriculum.

The perspective of organic education provides a relevant framework for understanding these interconnections. Turan & Caliskan (2018) describe an organic school as an educational environment understood as a living organism in which its various elements develop, interact, and influence one another. This perspective differs from educational approaches that view schools as linear systems characterized by simple relationships between input and output. Can & Turan (2021) reported that an organic approach can contribute to students’ motivation and learning outcomes. However, their study did not specifically explain how the principles of organic education can be used to understand the internalization of spiritual and religious values within Islamic education. This gap provides an opportunity to connect the perspective of organic education with Islamic educational traditions, which regard character and *adab* development as integral components of the purposes of education.

Classical Islamic educational traditions also provide a conceptual foundation for understanding education as a process shaped by the interaction of knowledge, habituation, role modeling, and the environment. Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of *ta'wid* (habituation), *uswah* (role modeling), and *bi'ah* (a conducive environment) in character development. Ahmed (2018) conceptualized *ta'dib* as an educational process directed toward the formation of a civilized person through an integrated relationship among knowledge, values, and life. Ibn Khaldun, in *Al-Muqaddimah*, also emphasized the role of habituation and the social environment in character formation. These perspectives share common ground with contemporary educational thought that emphasizes experience, participation, relationships, and holistic human development (Bates, 2019; Freire, 2020; Li & Craig, 2019; O'Connor, 2016). This convergence suggests that character development can be understood as an ecosystemic process shaped by interconnected educational experiences rather than by formal instruction alone.

The empirical context of this study is an integrated Islamic elementary school that incorporates religious instruction, religious habituation, Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah, *Smart Surau*, *muhadharah*, *didikan subuh*, and various religious activities into

everyday school life. The integration of these activities provides a relevant context for examining how formal education, religious culture, religious practices, and community involvement are interconnected in supporting students' religious character development. Previous research has shown that integrating religious values throughout school life can support students' character development (Sinta & Hakim, 2025). However, further investigation is needed to explain how these elements are interconnected within an Islamic educational ecosystem.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze how an Islamic organic education ecosystem is implemented to support students' religious character development and to identify the dimensions that constitute the interconnectedness of the ecosystem. Based on the empirical findings, the study proposes the Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem (IOEE) as a conceptual construct that integrates the principles of organic education, hidden curriculum, religious practices, and Islamic educational traditions within an interconnected framework. Accordingly, the contribution of this study lies in extending the understanding of organic education through an Islamic educational perspective and explaining how multiple components of the school environment interact to support students' religious character development.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The design was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of how the Islamic organic education ecosystem develops and operates within the context of everyday school life. The phenomenon cannot be adequately understood through the measurement of variables alone because it involves religious practices, school culture, social relationships, habituation, and the experiences of members of the school community. Therefore, the study involved direct researcher engagement in data collection and interpretation through interviews, observation, and document analysis. The case study approach enabled the phenomenon to be examined contextually while maintaining its connection to the real-life setting in which it occurred (Mizukoshi, 2023; Volmar & Eisenhardt, 2020).

Data were collected over eight weeks through three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 informants, comprising the principal, vice principal, three Islamic Education teachers, two classroom teachers from different grade levels, two coordinators, two parents, and four students from Grades 4–6. Participants were selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy to obtain diverse perspectives from different positions within the school's educational ecosystem (Engkizar et al., 2025; May et al., 2022). The interviews focused on participants' experiences of the school's religious culture, the implementation of religious programs, religious habituation, teacher–student interactions, and perceived changes in students' religious behavior.

Second, participant observation was conducted during various activities relevant to the research focus, including morning Quranic recitation, congregational prayer, *muhadharah*, *didikan subuh*, and Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah learning activities. The observations focused on interaction patterns, habituation practices, teacher role modeling, student participation, and forms of value internalization emerging in everyday activities.

Third, document analysis was conducted on various sources related to educational practices and religious character development, including curriculum documents, school work programs, students' prayer-monitoring records, and activity and achievement reports. These documents were used to complement and corroborate information obtained through interviews and observations.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Raskind et al (2019), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis was conducted simultaneously and iteratively from data collection through the final stage of interpretation, allowing emerging findings to be continuously compared with field data. The coding process was conducted in stages through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to identify concepts, establish relationships among categories, and develop the main themes explaining the relationships among school culture, religious programs, habituation practices, student participation, and religious character development. The coded data were then systematically compared across interviews, observations, and documents to identify consistent patterns as well as variations among data sources.

Data trustworthiness was ensured through the four criteria proposed by (Kocaman, 2024): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through source and technique triangulation and member checking of relevant information and interpretations. Transferability was supported through thick description of the research context, participant characteristics, and observed educational processes. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of the research process and an audit trail that enabled the stages of data collection, analysis, and interpretation to be traced. Confirmability was strengthened through documentation of researcher reflexivity and examination of the relationship between interpretations and the available empirical evidence. These strategies were employed to support methodological rigor in qualitative research (Charli et al., 2022; Engkizar et al., 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of observation, interview, and documentary data identified four interconnected dimensions underlying the religious educational ecosystem of the case study school: (1) religious culture as a hidden curriculum, (2) the integration of the Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah and *Smart Surau* programs, (3) student participation through *muhadharah*, *didikan subuh*, and religious competitions, and (4) the development of internal religious discipline. These four dimensions did not operate independently but mutually reinforced one another within the broader educational environment.

Religious Culture as a Hidden curriculum

One of the main findings concerned the role of religious culture as a form of hidden curriculum. Observations indicated that several religious practices had become part of students' daily routines without requiring continuous explicit instruction. For example, students were observed moving toward the prayer area as prayer time approached, reminding their peers to behave appropriately, and greeting teachers as part of their everyday interactions. These patterns indicate that religious values were cultivated not only through formal instruction but also through the routines and social practices embedded in the school environment.

This finding is consistent with Craig & Flores (2020) concept of the hidden curriculum, which refers to values and behavioral patterns learned through everyday institutional experiences rather than solely through formally stated curricular objectives. Apple (2018) further explain that institutional values can be transmitted through the atmosphere, rituals, social relationships, and repeated practices of an educational institution. In the case study school, the religious environment was reflected in students' dress, greetings, prayer routines, communal activities, and practices of sharing.

The physical environment also contributed to this process. Quranic calligraphy displayed along the school corridors, boards documenting students' memorization achievements, and the consistent use of Islamic dress functioned as environmental

cues that reinforced the school's religious orientation. This finding is consistent with Ramadhan & Astutik (2023); Sutrisno (2018), who found that religious culture can be more deeply internalized when it is developed through consistent environmental practices rather than relying primarily on rules and sanctions.

The interview data also indicated that teachers played an important role in maintaining this cultural environment. Teachers did not function solely as supervisors but were also perceived as behavioral models in everyday activities. This pattern is consistent with Hadi & Ummah (2020), who emphasize the importance of leadership commitment in developing religious character, as well as Li & Craig (2019) conception of educational relationships as communities in which values develop through authentic interaction. The findings also resonate with Sihab & Haningsih (2026) principles of *ing ngarso sung tulodo, ing madyo mangun karso*, and *tut wuri handayani*, particularly the emphasis on teachers as role models and facilitators of students' development.

The observed practices indicate that the internalization of religious values did not primarily depend on direct instruction. Students were repeatedly exposed to behavioral models and social expectations that gradually became part of their everyday conduct. In this context, the hidden curriculum operated through positive social reinforcement. Students tended to participate in prayer, exchange greetings, and engage in other religious routines because these practices had become normalized within the school community.

Integration of the Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah and *Smart Surau* Programs

The second finding concerned the integration of the Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah and *Smart Surau* programs into the school's broader educational activities. The Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah program was implemented for students in Grades 2–5, while the *Smart Surau* program was implemented for students in Grades 3–6. The analysis indicated that these programs were not treated as isolated supplementary activities. Rather, the religious knowledge and practices introduced through the programs were connected with students' everyday experiences at school.

The Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah program included Quran recitation, memorization of selected surahs and hadiths, basic religious knowledge, and the habituation of religious practices. Its implementation therefore extended beyond the transmission of religious knowledge. This pattern is consistent with Islam (2024) distinction among *ta'lim*, *tarbiyah*, and *ta'dib*, which respectively emphasize knowledge transmission, character development, and the formation of appropriate conduct.

The interview data also indicated that the program emphasized understanding and practice rather than memorization alone. One participant explained:

“A child who memorizes ten surahs and understands their meanings is much more valuable than a child who mechanically memorizes fifty surahs.” (Interview with a Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah coordinator)

This statement illustrates the pedagogical orientation identified in the field data, namely that religious learning was expected to be connected with understanding and everyday practice. This finding is consistent with Azizah & Nuha (2023), who reported that gradual and meaningful religious learning can support more stable understanding than approaches dominated by intensive memorization.

The *Smart Surau* program added a contextual and cultural dimension to the religious learning environment. The program introduced students to concepts and practices associated with the *surau* tradition, thereby connecting religious learning with the cultural context of the community. In this respect, the program provided a contextual space in which students could experience religious values through social and communal practices. Agus et al (2021) emphasizes the importance of living traditions in sustaining authentic spiritual education, while (Santoso et al., 2024)

found that contextual religious programs involving the broader educational community can support more sustainable character development.

The relationship between the Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah and *Smart Surau* programs was particularly significant. Knowledge and practices introduced through the Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah program could be reinforced through students' participation in religious routines and communal activities, while the *Smart Surau* program provided a context in which students could experience religious and cultural values. Thus, the two programs formed complementary components within the same educational environment. This pattern reflects O'Connor (2016) concept of continuity, in which learning experiences become more meaningful when they are connected across different contexts of students' lives.

Student Participation through *Muhadharah*, *Didikan Subuh*, and Religious Competitions

The third dimension concerned forms of student participation that positioned learners as active participants in religious education. Three activities were particularly prominent in the field data: *muhadharah*, *didikan subuh*, and religious competitions.

Muhadharah provided students with opportunities to deliver religious messages, lead prayers, and speak before the school community. Thus, the activity functioned not only as public-speaking practice but also required students to articulate and communicate religious values directly. This finding is consistent with Freire (2020) critique of *banking education*, a model that positions students primarily as recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in the learning process. Field observations indicated that students who regularly participated in *muhadharah* had greater opportunities to practice public speaking and religious communication. Kalsum & Khoerudin (2026) similarly found that activities providing students with opportunities to express religious values can contribute to confidence and the development of Islamic identity.

Didikan subuh provided a different form of engagement by emphasizing collective worship, religious reflection, and spiritual activities. Observations indicated that students were not only involved in ritual activities but also had opportunities to listen to religious messages and participate in reflective activities. This finding is related to the principle of engaged pedagogy discussed by Dansereau et al (2022), which emphasizes the involvement of learners as whole persons. Nurvayanti et al (2025) similarly argue that meaningful educational environments should acknowledge students' emotional and spiritual dimensions alongside cognitive development.

Religious competitions complemented these activities by providing opportunities for students to demonstrate and develop their religious knowledge in competitive settings. Participation in such activities provided another form of recognition for students' religious competencies. The findings therefore indicate that the religious educational environment did not define achievement solely in academic terms but also provided space for religious knowledge, communication skills, and character-related competencies.

An additional pattern emerged from observations of students participating in these activities. Students who were actively involved in *muhadharah*, *didikan subuh*, and religious competitions were often positively recognized by their peers for their confidence, religious knowledge, and conduct. This suggests that the school's social environment provided forms of positive recognition associated with religious competence and behavior. Thus, social recognition among students was not based solely on academic achievement but also on religious competence and conduct.

Development of Internal Religious Discipline

The fourth dimension concerned the development of students' religious discipline, particularly in relation to prayer. Interview and documentary data indicated

a tendency toward a gradual shift from externally regulated behavior to greater personal initiative. One student described this change as follows:

"I used to be afraid that the teacher would find out if I did not pray. Now I feel uncomfortable with myself when I miss a prayer." (Interview with a student)

This statement illustrates a shift from external monitoring toward internal awareness. However, this finding should not be interpreted as evidence that such a change occurred uniformly among all students. Rather, the interview data indicate that some students experienced a development of religious discipline that increasingly involved self-regulation.

The prayer-monitoring records provided additional evidence of this pattern. The documents indicated differences in the ways parents described students' prayer practices across grade levels. Records from Grades 1–2 more frequently contained reminders such as "already reminded," whereas records from Grades 4–6 more frequently referred to students taking the initiative to perform prayers without being reminded. These documentary patterns support the interview findings concerning the gradual development of self-regulation.

This pattern is consistent with Alfiannor et al (2025), who found that consistent value-based environments can contribute to a shift from externally controlled behavior toward more internal forms of motivation. It also corresponds with Sihab & Haningsih (2026) educational principles, particularly the progression from teacher modeling and guidance toward student independence.

The implementation of congregational prayer also provided opportunities for students to experience discipline through collective practice. Observations identified at least three dimensions of this activity: the development of time discipline, participation in communal religious practice, and opportunities for ritual leadership. Students were not only expected to participate but also had opportunities to take roles such as prayer leader and *mu'azzin*. In this context, religious practice functioned as an experiential form of learning rather than merely verbal instruction.

The findings also indicated that teacher–student relationships were important in supporting this process. Teachers participated in religious activities with students and provided explanations concerning the meaning and relevance of religious practices. This observation is consistent with Suhendro (2022), who emphasizes the importance of caring relationships in the internalization of values. The effects of this process were also reported beyond the school environment. One parent stated:

"My child is not only more disciplined in prayer. The child has also become more patient, more respectful toward us, and more caring toward their younger sibling." (Interview with a parent)

This account suggests that some religious behaviors and dispositions developed in the school context were perceived by parents as visible in family life. However, this finding is better understood as an indication of parents' perceptions of value transfer across contexts rather than as definitive evidence of a causal relationship between the school's programs and changes in students' behavior.

Emergence of the Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem

The integration of the four dimensions identified in the findings led to the development of a conceptual construct termed the Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem. This construct describes an educational ecosystem in which the formal Islamic curriculum, religious hidden curriculum, participatory pedagogy, and an integrated educational community operate as interconnected components.

The first component is the formal Islamic curriculum, including Islamic Education, the Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah program, and Quran memorization. The second is the religious hidden curriculum, represented by routines, behavioral norms, relationships, and the physical environment. The third is participatory and dialogical pedagogy, reflected in activities such as *muhadharah*, *didikan subuh*, and reflective

religious activities. The fourth is the broader educational community involving teachers, students, parents, and the surrounding community.

The findings indicate that the contribution of these components lies not simply in their individual presence but in their interconnection. Religious knowledge acquired through formal and supplementary programs was reinforced through daily routines; these routines were modeled by teachers and supported by the school environment; participatory activities provided opportunities for students to practice religious knowledge; and parental involvement extended some of these practices beyond the school context.

This configuration provides the empirical basis for conceptualizing the ecosystem as “organic.” Turan & Caliskan (2018) describe an organic school as an educational organization whose development depends on dynamic relationships among its components. The present findings extend this perspective by emphasizing the role of Islamic values, religious practices, and spiritual development within such an ecosystem. The conceptual foundation can also be related to Islam (2024) emphasis on the formation of morally and spiritually grounded individuals, Ibn Khaldun's emphasis on habituation within social environments, and the pedagogical contributions of (Engkizar et al., 2026; Jeynes, 2019).

The interview data provide further support for understanding the Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem as an interconnected educational configuration rather than a collection of independent programs. The experiences reported by students, teachers, and parents consistently emphasized gradual changes in everyday behavior rather than isolated outcomes attributable to individual programs. For example, students' increasing initiative in religious practices, parents' observations of behavioral changes at home, and teachers' emphasis on character development collectively point to an educational process extending across formal instruction, school routines, interpersonal relationships, and family life.

Importantly, the findings do not indicate that the Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem represents a standardized model that can automatically produce identical outcomes when transferred to other schools. Rather, the case demonstrates that the observed ecosystem developed through sustained institutional practices, teacher commitment, leadership, and community involvement. Therefore, individual programs such as *mubadharah*, the Madrasah Diniyah Awaliyah program, or *didikan subuh* may be adopted in other educational settings, but their presence alone does not constitute the Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem.

The Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem can consequently be understood as an emergent configuration arising from the interaction of multiple educational components. Its distinctive feature is not the novelty of each individual program but the way formal learning, informal culture, participatory practices, relationships, and community involvement are integrated into a continuous religious educational environment.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that religious character development is shaped not merely by the presence of religious programs but by the coherence of the educational ecosystem in which they are embedded. The case examined demonstrates that Islamic values are developed through four interconnected dimensions: religious culture as a hidden curriculum, the integration of *Smart Surau*, dialogical pedagogical practices, and religious discipline that develops toward greater self-regulation. These dimensions provide the empirical basis for the proposed Islamic Organic Education Ecosystem (IOEE), which conceptualizes Islamic education as an interconnected system of culture, relationships, habituation, and everyday practices.

Theoretically, IOEE offers a conceptual perspective that connects organic

education, hidden curriculum, and Islamic educational traditions in understanding religious character development. The findings suggest that the contribution of religious programs depends on their integration with school culture, leadership, teacher role modeling, and social relationships rather than on the programs themselves. This study is limited by its single-case qualitative design and the cultural and institutional characteristics of the context examined. Future research should examine the IOEE construct across different Islamic school contexts through comparative multisite studies and further develop and validate instruments based on its identified dimensions.

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