

Building Islamic Culture to Support Students' Religious Character Development: A Best Practice from Malaysia

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore how Islamic school culture can support the formation of students' religious character in elementary schools, namely at Madrasah Utsmaniah (ABIM) Malaysia. This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the phenomena that occur in depth with a focus on the formation of Islamic culture that supports the formation of students' religious character in schools. The results of the study indicate that Madrasah Utsmaniah (ABIM) has implemented several strategies involving routine religious activities such as congregational prayer, teaching interpretation, and joint prayer, as well as the integration of Islamic values in various subjects. In addition, strengthening institutional governance based on Islamic principles also plays a role in creating a conducive environment for the formation of students' religious character. The findings of this study can be used as additional references related to character education and provide practical direction for Islamic schools in efforts to strengthen students' religious character through an Islamic school culture approach. Recommendations for further research are to expand the scope by involving several schools with different typologies to obtain a more varied picture of the influence of Islamic school culture on the formation of religious character.*

Keywords: *Character Education, School Culture, Religious Character*



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A. Introduction

School culture plays a vital role in shaping the behavior and habits of all school members, including students, teachers, and staff. As a reflection of the values embraced by educational institutions, school culture is an important component in creating an environment that supports learning and character development of students. In the context of Islamic schools, school culture plays a greater role, especially in building students' religious character. This study focuses on how Islamic school culture can contribute to the formation of religious character in Madrasah Utsmaniah (ABIM) Malaysia, considering the various internal and external challenges faced by the school. Although

there have been several studies that highlight the importance of school culture in character formation, most of these studies discuss school culture in general without a deep focus on Islamic school culture. In addition, previous studies often only examine one dimension or aspect of learning without holistically exploring the role of Islamic school culture in supporting the formation of students' religious character.

This gap leads to the need for further studies that explore how Islamic school culture can be implemented effectively in Islamic schools to create an environment conducive to the development of students' religious character. A more operational approach to building school culture is essential, including implementing programs that are relevant to students' needs (Cahyanto, Arifin, Atok, Hadi, & Dewi, 2024). Research on school culture shows that a strong culture can influence students' behavior and support their character formation (Pike, Hart, Paul, Lickona, & Clarke, 2021). Cahyanto (2023) stated that school culture functions as a system that instills moral and spiritual values, as well as being a guideline for school residents in living their daily lives. Other studies show the importance of integrating religious values into learning activities to strengthen students' religious character (Asroni, 2023; Cahyanto, Arifin, et al., 2024). In addition, research by Cahyanto et al. (2024) shows that parental and community involvement is also very important in strengthening the values taught in schools.

However, most of these studies do not provide sufficient focus on the concrete role of Islamic school culture in supporting the formation of religious character, especially in countries with Islamic education systems such as Malaysia. Many studies are limited to the curriculum or learning aspects without investigating the challenges and efforts of Islamic schools in integrating religious values into every aspect of school life. On the other hand, schools must be able to create a culture that is able to promote good values, where not only teaching values partially but also practicing them in everyday life (Hill, Milliken, Goff, & Clark, 2015). Cases that reflect the decline in morality such as declining polite behavior, respect for parents and teachers, and the rise in violence among students, reflect the need to improve the quality of character education in schools (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). This is not only an individual responsibility, but also a collective responsibility of all educational institutions, especially Islamic-based schools. A school culture designed with an approach to religious and moral values can be a strategic solution to overcome current problems (Ramedlon, M, Adisel, Nurhidayat, & Hakim, 2023).

Strengthening the relationship between school and family is also an important element in ensuring the success of the formation of Islamic culture (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, Schellenberg, & Walters, 2020). In the long term, Islamic culture in schools that is consistently applied can be the foundation for the formation of students' moral and spiritual competence and integrity (McGrath, Han, Brown, & Meindl, 2021). Madrasah Utsmaniah (ABIM) Malaysia is one of the Islamic schools that stands out for its implementation of Islamic school culture. The balance between intellectual knowledge and moral values is an important indicator of the success of education in schools (Cahyanto, Mukhtar, Iliyyun, & Faliyaandra, 2022). Based on the results of a preliminary study including interviews with the head of the madrasah (10/10/2024) it shows that this

school has integrated Islamic values into every aspect of school life. Through the Islamic school culture, Madrasah Utsmaniah has succeeded in creating an environment that can support the development of students' religious character comprehensively.

The positive impact is seen in the behavior of students who are more Islamic in everyday interactions and in carrying out religious obligations. In addition, based on a preliminary study (10/10/2024) it also shows that Madrasah Utsmaniah Malaysia has shown success in shaping students' character through an approach based on Islamic values. This study offers something new by trying to explore in more depth how the implementation of Islamic school culture in Madrasah Utsmaniah (ABIM) Malaysia can support the formation of students' religious character. This study not only focuses on the aspects of school policy but also considers the role of leadership, parental involvement, and the influence of the school environment in forming a culture that supports religious character education. The specific objectives of this study are to explore the Islamic school culture implemented in Madrasah Utsmaniah and analyze how the culture plays a role in forming students' religious character, as well as provide directions for the development of a more effective Islamic culture-based education model.

B. Method

This study aims to explore in depth the school's efforts in building an Islamic culture to support the development of student character, specifically capturing the experiences, views, and perceptions of various parties, including teachers, students, and principals, regarding strategies for building an Islamic culture in schools (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). The researcher used in-depth interview techniques, participant observation, and documentation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In-depth interviews involved teachers, principals, and students to explore their experiences in the formation of an Islamic culture at Madrasah Utsmaniah Malaysia. Participatory observation was conducted to directly record the dynamics of interactions between teachers, students, and the surrounding environment during learning activities (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In addition, documents such as activity notes, photos, and relevant school reports were analyzed to complete the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Furthermore, the researcher conducted a systematic data analysis using thematic analysis. This process involves coding data, identifying patterns, and developing key themes relevant to the research objectives (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). To ensure the validity and credibility of the findings, the researcher used triangulation by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation (Stake, 2010). This study is expected to contribute in the form of a deeper understanding of how Islamic culture formation strategies are applied in building students' religious character. In addition, the results of this study are also expected to be the basis for formulating educational policies that are more contextual and relevant to school needs, especially in building a strong Islamic culture.

C. Results and Discussion

Results

Based on in-depth research conducted at Madrasah Uthmaniah (ABIM) Penang Malaysia, various findings were revealed related to school strategies to support the development of students' religious character through in-depth interviews, observations, and document studies. The findings show various strategies that have been implemented by the school in building an Islamic school culture to support the development of students' religious character. These strategies include routine religious activities, integration of Islamic values in learning, and strengthening Islamic-based institutional governance. Based on the results of interviews with the board of teachers, it shows that this school has long implemented religious character education in schools. This effort has been able to provide a positive impact on changes in student behavior and character that are more Islamic. As conveyed by the following teacher.

Implementation of character education based on Islamic values that are applied consistently through routine religious activities, integration of Islamic values in learning, and strengthening institutional governance. We have long made religious character education an integral part of the education system in schools (ITV-01Tch).

Research conducted at Madrasah Uthmaniah (ABIM) Penang Malaysia revealed that this school has various strategic efforts to shape the religious character of students through routine religious activities. One of the main activities implemented is the habit of performing dzuhur and ashar prayers in congregation. Every day, all students are required to perform dzuhur and ashar prayers in congregation at school. This activity is an integral part of the daily routine that not only teaches the obligation of worship, but also forms discipline, time discipline, and a sense of togetherness among students. By performing congregational prayers, students are also taught to make worship a priority in their daily lives. This is part of the school's efforts to create a religious and peaceful environment.

In addition to congregational prayers, Madrasah Uthmaniah also regularly holds Islamic holidays, which involve the entire school community in various activities. The commemoration of Islamic holidays, such as the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha, is filled with events that are not only ceremonial, but also full of meaning. Activities carried out include religious sermons, Islamic competitions, social services, and sharing activities with others. The commemoration of this big day is a means to remind students about the Islamic values contained in the celebration, such as gratitude and social concern. By involving students in this commemoration, they are taught to appreciate important moments in Islam and understand the spiritual meaning contained in each celebration. Another very important effort in forming students' religious character is the habit of memorizing and reading the Qur'an every day. As conveyed by the following class teacher.

This school pays special attention to developing students' skills in reading and memorizing the Qur'an. Every student is required to memorize and read verses of the Qur'an regularly which is carried out after the dzuhur prayer. This program is a means to bring students closer to the Qur'an, strengthen their faith, and help students to better understand the teachings of the Qur'an which are the guidelines for the lives of Muslims (ITV-02Tch).

The memorization and recitation of the Qur'an is also carried out collectively, with other students supporting and correcting each other's memorization. This motivates students to be more active in memorizing and strengthens the sense of togetherness and cooperation among them. The habit of memorizing has become a tradition at Madrasah Uthmaniah to strengthen religious character among students and introduce students to the values of discipline, responsibility, and high enthusiasm for learning. Overall, the efforts implemented by Madrasah Uthmaniah through the habit of praying in congregation, commemorating Islamic holidays, and memorizing and recitation of the Qur'an have made a major contribution to shaping students' religious character. Through these routine activities, students gain deeper religious knowledge and learn to apply Islamic values in their daily lives.



Figure 1. Routine Religious Activities at School

In addition, Madrasah Uthmaniah (ABIM) Penang Malaysia also integrates Islamic values in learning. One of the efforts made is by learning interpretation and the Qur'an every morning. Every morning before learning activities begin, students are taught about the meaning of the verses of the Qur'an. This learning aims to increase understanding of the verses of the Qur'an and invite students to reflect on the moral and spiritual messages contained therein. Through learning the meaning of the Qur'an in this school, it is hoped that they can internalize Islamic teachings in their lives. Madrasah Uthmaniah also applies Pegon Arabic language learning as part of the curriculum. Learning Pegon Arabic is very important in helping students understand classical Islamic texts that use the Pegon Arabic script. This has an important role in teaching students to understand ancient books, such as books of fiqh, hadith, and interpretation which are the basis of Islamic teachings.

By understanding Pegon Arabic, students can improve their language skills while deepening their understanding of the main sources of Islamic teachings. Furthermore, the integration of Islamic values in learning is also carried out through learning the practice of prayer movements. This school provides special lessons on the correct way to pray, starting from the movements, readings, to the intentions that must be well understood by each student. This learning is carried out periodically to ensure that students not only understand the meaning of each prayer movement, but can also perform the prayer correctly and solemnly. Teachers teach in detail about the method in accordance with the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, so that students can understand every aspect of prayer and make it an integral part of their spiritual life.

The learning of prayer movements applied at Madrasah Uthmaniah is not only focused on theory but also includes direct practice. Each student is given the opportunity to practice prayer movements together in front of the teacher to ensure that they can perform the prayer correctly. Through the integration of Islamic values in learning, such as learning the meaning of the Qur'an, Pegon Arabic, and the practice of prayer movements, Madrasah Uthmaniah has succeeded in creating an Islamic culture that supports the formation of students' religious character. Students are taught to apply Islamic teachings in various aspects of their lives, both in terms of worship, social, and ethics. With this approach, Madrasah Uthmaniah has succeeded in forming students into better individuals, more religious, and more caring towards others, all of which are part of forming a strong religious character.



Figure 2. Integration of Islamic Values in Learning

Based on the results of the observation, it also shows that the school environment is designed to be very relevant to efforts to support the formation of students' Islamic character. The physical arrangement and social environment of the school such as displays of verses of the Quran, quotes from hadiths, and posters in the school have created a religious atmosphere. In addition, school regulations are based on Islamic principles, such as the habit of saying hello, dressing modestly according to sharia, and time discipline. In addition, Madrasah Uthmaniah (ABIM) Penang Malaysia also strengthens Islamic-based institutional governance. One of the efforts made is through exemplary behavior and regulations applied in the school. Teachers and staff at this school always provide good examples in living everyday Islamic life, such as saying hello politely, which is then followed by students. Strengthening Islamic-based

institutional governance is also reflected in efforts to collaborate with parents through school forums. Madrasah Utsmaniah actively involves parents in the process of educating students' religious character, this is reinforced by the following teacher's statement.

Every semester the school holds a special forum that invites parents to discuss and work together with the school in supporting the development of students' character and religion. This forum is a place to exchange information about student development, while also providing parents with an understanding of the importance of religious education at home and at school (ITV-03Tch).

This collaboration ensures that efforts to form religious character are carried out at school and supported by the family environment. The school routinely holds Islamic guidance and discussions in the ta'lim assembly. Once a week, students and teachers gather in the ta'lim assembly to attend the ta'lim assembly which includes learning about morals, worship, and other Islamic values. Overall, strengthening Islamic-based institutional governance at Madrasah Uthmaniah through role models, rules, collaboration with parents, and Islamic guidance in the ta'lim assembly has made a major contribution to the formation of students' religious character.



Figure 3. Character Development in Non-Academic Activities

Based on the research results that have been described above, it can be concluded that Madrasah Utsmaniah (ABIM) Penang Malaysia has successfully implemented various effective strategies in building an Islamic culture to support the formation of students' religious character. These strategies include routine religious activities, such as the habit of praying dzuhur and ashar in congregation, commemorating Islamic holidays, and the habit of memorizing and reading the Qur'an, integrating Islamic values in learning, which includes learning the meaning of the Qur'an every morning, teaching Pegon Arabic, and practicing prayer movements, as well as strengthening Islamic-based institutional governance through role models, rules, cooperation with parents through school forums, and Islamic guidance in the ta'lim assembly. Overall, these strategies are summarized in table 1 on School Strategies in Building an Islamic Culture.

Table 1. Research Findings: School Strategies in Building Islamic Culture

No	Aspect	Research Findings
1.	Routine religious activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The habit of praying dzuhur and ashar in congregation at school, this activity is to teach students the obligation of worship and train them to be disciplined and respect time. • Commemoration of Islamic holidays with various activities involving all students, teachers, and parents to instill Islamic values. • The habit of memorizing and reciting the Quran every day. Every morning students read the Quran together under the guidance of the teacher and continue with the activity of memorizing the Quran according to the set target.
2.	Integration of Islamic values in learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning the meaning and interpretation of the Quran every morning which aims to strengthen students' understanding of the contents of the Quran. • Learning Arabic Pegon, students are taught to read and write Arabic Pegon script which is often used in traditional Islamic books. • Learning the practice of prayer movements, this is part of forming students' understanding of the correct implementation of worship
3.	Strengthening Islamic- based institutional governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Arabic Pegon, students are taught to read and write Arabic Pegon script which is often used in traditional Islamic books. • Learning the practice of prayer movements, this is part of forming students' understanding of the correct implementation of worship. • Role model and obedience to rules through simple habits such as greeting and being disciplined in all activities at school. • Collaboration with parents through school forums, these are concrete steps to support synergy in efforts to instill Islamic values in students. • Islamic guidance and discussion in the ta'lim assembly. In this activity, students and teachers together discuss various Islamic topics with an interactive and applicable approach

Discussion

Based on the results of research at Madrasah Uthmaniah (ABIM) Penang Malaysia, various effective strategies were found in building an Islamic culture to support the formation of students' religious character. These strategies include routine religious activities, such as the habit of praying dzuhur and ashar in congregation, commemorating Islamic holidays, and the habit of memorizing and reciting the Qur'an, the integration of Islamic values in learning, which includes learning the meaning of the Qur'an every

morning, teaching Pegon Arabic, and practicing prayer movements, as well as strengthening Islamic-based institutional governance carried out through role models, regulations, collaboration with parents through school forums, and Islamic guidance in the ta'lim assembly.

The habit of praying dzuhur and ashar in congregation at school plays an important role in forming students' discipline and responsibility towards their religious obligations (Syarnubi, Mansir, Purnomo, Harto, & Hawi, 2021). In the context of character education, this activity is a means to instill Islamic values. This activity involves all students, teachers, and school staff, creating a religious atmosphere that supports the learning process. According to Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis (2007) habituation through observation, imitation, and reinforcement from the social environment, such as teachers and peers, helps students practice these values in their daily lives. With direct guidance from teachers, congregational prayer becomes an effective means of moral education, creating students who are more responsible and aware of the importance of carrying out religious obligations (Cahyanto, Indana, Fiveronica, Salamah, & Garbacz, 2024).

Commemorating Islamic holidays at school is a form of celebration and creates a sense of togetherness and strengthens social ties between students. Events such as the commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday, Isra Mi'raj, or Eid al-Adha are filled with educational activities such as religious lectures, religious competitions, and social actions. This is in line with (Baderiah & Munawir, 2024; Harini, Wahyuningtyas, Sutrisno, Wanof, & Ausat, 2023) where collaboration between the micro environment (school and family) plays an important role in shaping students' character. In addition, parental involvement in this activity provides a strong message about the importance of ongoing character education at home and school.

The habit of memorizing and reciting the Qur'an every morning is also one of the superior strategies in supporting the formation of students' religious character. This activity aims to improve the literacy of the Qur'an and provide positive psychological impacts such as increased concentration, emotional management, and inner peace. According to Nisak's research (2018), reading and memorizing the Qur'an regularly helps students build a deep understanding of religious values. This activity also creates a conducive learning atmosphere at the beginning of the day, where students start activities with enthusiasm and focus. From the perspective of Islamic education, memorizing the Qur'an also helps shape students' noble morals, in line with the values contained in the Qur'an itself (Fadliyah, Akbar, & Muchtar, 2021). With guidance from teachers, students not only understand the text of the Qur'an, but also integrate these values into their daily lives.

The strategy of habituating routine religious activities reflects structured school management based on an Islamic vision. The principal, teachers, and staff play an active role in designing, implementing, and evaluating these programs to create a conducive school culture. A good managerial approach ensures that these activities are integrated with the curriculum and become part of the school routine (Cahyanto, Srihayuningsih, Nikmah, & Habsia, 2024). This program strengthens classroom learning practices by

creating a conducive social environment, so that the strategy of character formation through learning accompanied by routine religious activities is clear evidence that a conducive environment in schools can have a significant impact on the moral, spiritual, and social development of students. These findings show the importance of synergy between habituation, school management, and collaboration with parents to achieve broader character education goals.

The integration of learning the meaning and interpretation of the Qur'an every morning at school provides a solid foundation for students in understanding religious values. In this learning, students are not only taught to read the verses of the Qur'an, but are also given a contextual understanding of the moral messages and teachings contained therein. This approach is important in building students' critical awareness of Islamic teachings that are relevant to everyday life (Narimo & Muhtar, 2020). This activity encourages students to internalize Islamic values practically, so that they become part of their character. In addition, learning to read and write Arabic Pegon script in schools shows the commitment of educational institutions to preserving traditional Islamic cultural heritage. Arabic Pegon script, which is often used in yellow books and ancient Islamic documents, has high historical and religious value. This is important in building students' religious and cultural identity amidst the challenges of globalization.

Moreover, this learning is a medium to connect the younger generation with the tradition of Islamic knowledge that teaches tolerance, wisdom, and pride in their Islamic identity (Al Atok, Al Hakim, Untari, & Margono, 2016). Learning the practice of prayer movements is a concrete step to ensure that students understand and carry out worship according to religious guidance. With the guidance of teachers, students not only understand the technical aspects of performing prayers, but also the spiritual meaning behind each movement. This encourages a deeper appreciation of worship and forms positive habits in everyday life. In addition, this learning also builds students' discipline and sense of responsibility towards their religious obligations (Arifin, 2018). The integration of religious values in learning is also a response to moral challenges in the modern era. Value-based education, as implemented in this school, is a strategic solution to provide a solid moral foundation for students.

The role models and rules applied in schools such as the habit of saying hello and being disciplined are useful as a foundation for forming Islamic character. Collaboration with parents through school forums is one of the strategic steps to ensure the sustainability of the values taught at school and at home (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009). By involving parents in discussions and school activities, such as determining religious programs, schools strengthen the synergy between the home and school environments. This relevance is very important, because the family is the first place for children to learn moral values, while schools function as a complement that expands and strengthens this learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the context of Islamic education, this collaboration also reflects the principle of shura (deliberation), which is one of the basic values in Islamic teachings. With this synergy, students receive a complete character education, where

Islamic values are consistently integrated in every aspect of their lives (Harini et al., 2023).

The ta'lim assembly held in schools is an important means to build students' understanding of Islamic teachings interactively. This interactive approach is in line with the theory (Lickona et al., 2007) where social interaction is an important means in the formation of understanding and values. Students are invited to actively participate in discussing Islamic issues, from morals to Islamic law, with an applicable approach. In the era of digitalization and globalization, strengthening Islamic-based institutional management is becoming increasingly relevant. The unfiltered flow of information and the influence of external cultures that often conflict with local values make students vulnerable to moral degradation. For policy makers, the results of this study can be the basis for designing educational programs that are more focused on strengthening Islamic character, both locally and nationally. On the practical side, this study provides inspiration for other schools to adopt or modify similar strategies according to their context.

D. Conclusion

The results of the study at Madrasah Uthmaniah revealed that the school's efforts to build an Islamic culture to support the development of students' religious character were carried out through an integrated strategy, including routine religious activities, integration of Islamic values in learning, and strengthening Islamic-based institutional governance. Routine religious activities, such as the habit of praying in congregation, memorizing and reciting the Qur'an, and directly commemorating Islamic holidays train students to internalize religious values in their daily lives. The integration of Islamic values into learning, such as through teaching the interpretation of the Qur'an, Pegon Arabic script, and worship practices, provides students with a deep understanding as well as practical skills that are relevant to religious teachings. This strategy not only builds student discipline and responsibility, but also strengthens the formation of a solid Islamic character, balanced between intellectual and spiritual aspects.

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