

Strategy for Strengthening Character Education Through Religious Culture in Schools in The Ma'arif NU Tulungagung Primary School

Suminto^{1*}, Rifo Rifat Basya²

¹State Islamic University of Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung

²Kahuripan University of Kediri

Corresponding Author: Suminto, kangminto990@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

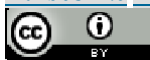
Keywords: Character Education, Religious Culture, LP Ma'arif NU, Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah, Student Character Development

Received : 21 February

Revised : 23 March

Accepted: 23 April

©2026 Suminto, Basya: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Atribusi 4.0 Internasional](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

This study analyzes strategies for strengthening character education through religious culture in schools under LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation involving principals, teachers, and students. The findings show that character education is implemented through religious habituation activities such as congregational prayers, recitation of prayers, istighotsah, shalawat, greeting culture, and Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah learning. Teacher role modeling and the integration of moral values into classroom learning also support character formation. Religious culture positively influences students' discipline, responsibility, politeness, social awareness, tolerance, and religious attitudes. However, digital media influence and differences in family background remain major challenges in implementing character education effectively.

INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a crucial issue in the world of education as various moral and social issues among students increase. The development of digital technology, the flow of globalization, and changes in social interaction patterns have impacted the behavior of the younger generation, such as declining discipline, low manners, increased bullying behavior, and weak respect for teachers and parents. This condition indicates that education has not fully succeeded in creating a balance between intellectual intelligence and morality of students. Education is ultimately not only required to produce graduates who excel academically, but also possess integrity, responsibility, and religious character. Philosophically, character education is an important part of the national education goals that place the formation of people who are faithful, pious, and have noble character as the main orientation of education. Lickona (2015: 32) explains that character education must be able to shape the aspects of *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action* so that students not only understand moral values, but are also able to apply them in everyday life.

From an Islamic educational perspective, character building is also related to the instilling of noble morals through habituation and role modeling. Nata (2017: 58) emphasizes that character education in Islam is directed at fostering religious, honest, disciplined, and responsible behavior as part of the formation of a Muslim personality. Conceptually, strengthening character education can be achieved through a school culture that supports the continuous internalization of values. Samani and Hariyanto (2019: 41) explain that character education cannot be achieved solely through theoretical learning but must be realized through habituation, role modeling, and a consistent school culture. In the context of faith-based schools, religious culture is an important instrument in building student character through routine spiritual and social activities. Asmani (2018: 75) states that religious culture in schools can create an educational environment conducive to the development of discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and noble morals. Research by Annisa, Ismail, and Mabururi (2024) shows that religious-based character education is effective in building student character through habituation and teacher role models. Research by Ramadhan (2022) also explains that religious culture influences increased student discipline and responsibility in Islamic schools. Furthermore, Farmawaty (2021) found that implementing religious culture is more effective in strengthening students' religious character than theoretical learning approaches.

Literature shows that research on strategies for strengthening character education through religious culture in LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung schools is still relatively limited, especially those that examine the integration of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah values in school culture as a strategy for building student character. Based on these conditions, this study aims to analyze the strategy for strengthening character education through religious culture in LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung schools, identify supporting and inhibiting factors for its implementation, and analyze its impact on student behavior. Schools under the auspices of LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung have unique characteristics because they integrate Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah An-Nahdliyah values in school culture

through activities such as congregational prayer, prayer reading, istighotsah, the culture of greeting and salim, and Aswaja learning. The practice of religious culture is not only a routine religious activity, but also a medium for internalizing the values of discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and respect for others.

This research is important to understand how religious culture is implemented as a character-building strategy in the LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung school environment. Character building based on religious culture is relevant because schools not only function as institutions for transferring knowledge but also as spaces for the formation of students' moral, spiritual, and social values. The integration of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah values into school culture demonstrates a systematic effort to build religious character through habituation, role models, and ongoing religious activities. Several previous studies have focused more on character education from a general perspective, the implementation of religious culture in Islamic schools, or character building through formal learning. Studies that specifically examine strategies for strengthening character education based on religious culture in LP Ma'arif NU schools, particularly those that integrate Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah An-Nahdliyah values into school culture, are still relatively limited. In fact, the characteristics of school culture within the LP Ma'arif NU environment are unique because they combine religious traditions, social habits, and NU values in daily educational activities. The novelty of this research emerged in the study of the strategy of strengthening character education through religious culture based on Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah values at the LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung school as a model for developing student character that is adaptive to the challenges of the digital era without eliminating Islamic identity and NU traditions.

This research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of character education studies based on religious culture. Theoretically, this research can enrich the literature on the implementation of character education in Islamic educational institutions based on NU, particularly regarding the integration of religious culture in the process of character formation of students. This research is also expected to strengthen the study on the relevance of school culture as a medium for internalizing moral and spiritual values in the digital era. Practically, the research results can be a reference for schools, teachers, and educational administrators in designing effective, adaptive, and sustainable character strengthening strategies through the development of a religious school culture that is appropriate to the needs and challenges of today's education. In addition, this research is expected to be able to provide recommendations in developing a religious school culture that remains relevant to the times without eliminating the moral values and Islamic traditions that are the hallmark of education at LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character Building

Character education is the process of consciously and systematically developing students' moral, ethical, and personality values through learning activities, habituation, role models, and school culture. Character education not only aims to develop intellectual intelligence, but also to develop students' attitudes, behaviors, and social responsibilities in their daily lives. Lickona (2015: 32) explains that character education encompasses three main components: *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action*. These three aspects demonstrate that character education is not sufficient merely to understand moral values, but must also be able to shape awareness and concrete actions in students' behavior.

Character education in the context of national education is related to the goals of Indonesian education as stated in the National Education System Law, namely to shape individuals who are faithful, pious, have noble character, are competent, creative, and responsible. Muslich (2018: 67) states that character education is a planned effort to help students understand, care about, and implement ethical values in their personal and social lives. Meanwhile, Samani and Hariyanto (2019: 41) emphasize that the success of character education is greatly influenced by an educational environment that supports the process of habituation and consistent role modeling.

From an Islamic educational perspective, character education is synonymous with the development of noble character. Nata (2017: 58) explains that character education in Islam is directed at developing behaviors that reflect religious values, honesty, trustworthiness, discipline, responsibility, and social concern. This concept positions education as a means of developing individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also possess spiritual and moral qualities. Therefore, character education in Islamic educational institutions is generally integrated through the practice of worship, teacher role models, and religious culture applied in daily school life.

Religious Culture in Schools

Religious culture is a set of religious values, customs, traditions, and activities consistently applied in the educational environment to shape the character of students. Religious culture in schools is not only manifested in religious rituals but also reflected in patterns of social interaction, discipline, respect for teachers, and concern for others. Asmani (2018: 75) explains that religious culture in schools is an effective medium for the internalization of moral and spiritual values because it is carried out through continuous habituation.

Religious culture plays a crucial role in fostering an educational environment conducive to the development of student character. Suyadi (2020: 93) states that a religious school culture fosters an educational atmosphere that fosters discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and noble character. Religious culture can be implemented through activities such as congregational prayer, pre-class prayers, *istighotsah* (religious prayer), commemorating Islamic holidays, and practicing greetings and salutations. These activities serve as a vehicle for character development, as they train students to cultivate positive behaviors in their daily lives.

In the context of Nahdlatul Ulama-based schools, religious culture is also closely linked to the instilling of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah An-Nahdliyah values.

The values of *tawassuth*, *tawazun*, *tasamuh*, and *i'tidal* are important principles in shaping students' character. The implementation of these values is realized through a school culture that instills moderation, tolerance, balance, and respect for diversity. Therefore, the religious culture at LP Ma'arif NU schools serves not only as spiritual reinforcement but also as a strategy for shaping students' social and moral character.

Strategy for Strengthening Character Education through Religious Culture

The strategy for strengthening character education through religious culture is implemented through a process of habituation, role modeling, integration of character values into learning, and the creation of a school environment that supports the internalization of moral and spiritual values. Habituation is a crucial strategy because character is formed through repeated and consistent behavior. Teachers, in this regard, play a strategic role as role models for students, demonstrating religious attitudes, discipline, responsibility, and social awareness.

Zubaedi (2017: 112) explains that effective character education must involve all school components, from the principal, teachers, students, and parents. Character building cannot be achieved solely through classroom learning but must be integrated into the school culture and students' social lives. Therefore, a religious-based character building strategy requires synergy between academic activities, religious activities, and the creation of a positive social environment.

Previous research has shown that religious culture has a significant influence on student character formation. Annisa, Ismail, and Mabruri (2024) explained that religious-based character education can improve students' moral awareness and social behavior through habituation and role modeling. Ramadhan (2022) also found that religious culture contributes to increased student discipline and responsibility in Islamic schools. Farmawaty's (2021) research shows that consistent implementation of religious culture is more effective in shaping students' religious character than purely theoretical learning approaches.

Research on strategies for strengthening character education based on religious culture in schools at the Ma'arif NU Tulungagung Institute of Islamic Studies (LP Ma'arif NU) in Tulungagung is still relatively limited. Most previous studies have focused more on character education in general and have not specifically examined the integration of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* values into school culture as a strategy for developing student character. Therefore, this research is crucial to strengthen the study of the implementation of NU-based religious culture in strengthening character education within the Ma'arif NU Tulungagung Institute of Islamic Studies (LP Ma'arif NU) in Tulungagung.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research aims to deeply understand the strategy for strengthening character education through religious culture in

schools within the Ma'arif NU Tulungagung Correctional Institution (LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung). This approach allows researchers to obtain a comprehensive picture of the implementation of religious culture, the process of internalizing character values, and the factors influencing the implementation of character education in the school environment. Sugiyono (2022:18) explains that qualitative research is used to deeply understand social phenomena based on the perspectives of participants in a natural context.

The research was conducted at several schools under the auspices of LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung, which implements religious culture in daily educational activities. The research subjects included principals, teachers, students, and related parties involved in the implementation of character education in schools. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, taking into account the informants' involvement and understanding of the implementation of religious culture and strengthening character education in the school environment. Moleong (2021:224) states that purposive sampling is used to select informants who are considered to have a deep understanding of the research problem and therefore able to provide relevant and accurate information.

Data collection techniques were conducted through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to directly observe the implementation of religious culture in schools, such as congregational prayer activities, prayer recitation, the culture of greeting and shaking hands, istighotsah, and other habituation activities related to strengthening student character. In-depth interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, and students to obtain information regarding strategies for strengthening character education, supporting and inhibiting factors, and the impact of religious culture implementation on student behavior. Documentation was used to supplement the research data through school archives, regulations, religious activity schedules, activity photos, and other documents relevant to the research.

The data analysis technique used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014:12), which includes data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data condensation was carried out by selecting and focusing data relevant to the research objectives. Data presentation was carried out in the form of descriptive narratives to facilitate understanding of the research results. Conclusions were drawn in stages based on patterns, relationships, and findings obtained during the research process. Data validity was carried out through source triangulation and technical triangulation to ensure the validity and credibility of the research data. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information from various informants, while technical triangulation was carried out by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation so that the data obtained was more accurate and could be scientifically accounted for.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of Religious Culture as a Strategy for Strengthening Character Education

The results of the study indicate that strengthening character education in schools within the Ma'arif NU Tulungagung Correctional Institution (LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung) is carried out through the implementation of religious culture integrated into daily school activities. Religious culture is implemented not only in the form of formal worship activities, but also through the habituation of social and moral behavior that is carried out continuously. The implementation of religious culture is realized through congregational prayer activities, reciting prayers before and after learning, istighotsah, reciting shalawat, the culture of greeting and salim, and learning Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah An-Nahdliyah. These activities become a means of forming religious character, discipline, responsibility, and respect for teachers and fellow students. The religious culture implemented in the Ma'arif NU Tulungagung Correctional Institution (LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung) shows that the process of character formation is carried out through a habituation approach. Students are accustomed to carrying out religious activities regularly so that character values are embedded in daily behavior. This condition is in line with the opinion of Samani and Hariyanto (2019: 41) who explain that character education will be effective if carried out through consistent habituation in the educational environment.

Continuous religious practices can shape students' awareness of disciplined, polite, and responsible behavior without constant supervision. In addition to these practices, teacher role models are also an important strategy in strengthening character education. Teachers not only serve as transmitters of learning materials but also as role models in everyday attitudes and behavior. Research shows that teachers actively provide examples of religious, disciplined, polite, and caring behavior towards students. These role models have a significant influence on character formation because students tend to imitate the behavior they see in the school environment. This finding aligns with Lickona (2015: 89), who states that role models are a key element in the success of character education because moral values are more easily accepted through real practice than through theoretical explanations.

Strengthening character education is also carried out through the integration of character values into the learning process. Teachers connect learning materials with religious values, responsibility, cooperation, and social awareness so that students acquire not only academic knowledge but also moral and spiritual understanding. This integration demonstrates that character education does not stand alone as an additional program, but rather becomes part of the overall educational process at school. This aligns with Muslich's (2018: 103) view, which explains that character education must be integrated into all educational activities so that the process of internalizing values can take place comprehensively.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Strengthening Character Education

The research results show that the success of strengthening character education through religious culture is influenced by several supporting factors. The primary factor stems from the school's commitment to creating a religious and conducive educational environment. The principal plays a crucial role in developing policies and programs that support the implementation of religious

culture within the school environment. Furthermore, the support of teachers and educational staff is also crucial because all elements of the school are actively involved in instilling character values in students. Support from parents and the family environment also contributes to the success of character education. Students who receive religious education at home tend to more easily adopt the religious culture implemented at school. The synergy between schools and families demonstrates that character education requires collaboration between the formal educational environment and the students' social environment. This finding aligns with Zubaedi (2017:112), who states that the success of character education is influenced by the involvement of the entire educational environment, including the family and community.

This study also identified several inhibiting factors in the implementation of character education. The development of digital technology and the use of social media pose a major challenge because they significantly influence student behavior. Uncontrolled access to information makes some students more susceptible to the influence of external cultures that are inconsistent with the school's religious and moral values. Furthermore, the lack of parental supervision of technology use also hinders the process of character development in students. Another inhibiting factor stems from differences in family backgrounds and social environments. Not all students have a family environment that supports religious habits, requiring schools to work harder to instill character values. This situation demonstrates that character education cannot be implemented instantly but requires a consistent and ongoing process. Suyadi (2020:93) explains that the challenges of character education in the modern era are increasingly complex because students face various social influences that can influence the formation of their behavior and morals.

The Impact of Religious Culture on the Formation of Students' Character

The implementation of religious culture at the Ma'arif NU Tulungagung LP school has a positive impact on the character development of students. The results of the study showed changes in student behavior, making them more disciplined, polite, responsible, and having better social awareness. Students also showed respect for teachers and accustomed to applying religious values in their daily lives. The habit of consistent religious activities shapes students' awareness to maintain behavior in accordance with moral values and religious teachings. Religious culture also influences the formation of students' social character. Joint activities such as congregational prayer, istighotsah, and other religious activities build attitudes of togetherness, tolerance, and cooperation among students. These values are an important part of the formation of harmonious social character in the school environment. These findings support the view of Asmani (2018: 75) who explains that religious culture can create an educational environment that supports the formation of noble morals through social and spiritual habits.

The implementation of a religious culture based on the values of Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah An-Nahdliyah also fosters moderate and tolerant character in students. The values of tawassuth, tawazun, tasamuh, and i'tidal applied in the school culture help students understand the importance of a

balanced attitude, respect for differences, and maintaining harmonious social relationships. This is crucial amidst the development of an increasingly pluralistic and complex society. Thus, the religious culture at LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung serves not only as spiritual reinforcement but also as a strategy for developing students' social and moral character relevant to the challenges of education in the digital era.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study indicate that strengthening character education through religious culture at the LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung school needs to be carried out sustainably and adaptively to current developments. Follow-up actions that schools can take include strengthening the integration of character values in all educational activities, both in classroom learning and non-academic activities. Schools need to increase the consistency of implementing religious culture through structured habits, such as congregational prayer, reciting prayers, istighotsah, Aswaja learning, and strengthening the culture of greetings and shaking hands in daily interactions. Teacher capacity development is also an important part of the follow-up to this research. Teachers need to be provided with training and mentoring related to character education strategies based on religious culture so they can integrate moral and spiritual values into the learning process more effectively.

In addition, schools need to build more intensive collaboration with parents through communication and joint coaching programs so that the process of strengthening character does not only take place at school, but also within the family environment. The positive use of digital technology also needs to be a concern in the development of character education. Schools can develop digital-based educational media that contain religious and character values to counteract the negative influence of social media on student behavior. This step is important to ensure that character education remains relevant to the needs of the younger generation in the digital era without eliminating the moral values and Islamic traditions that are the hallmark of the LP Ma'arif NU school.

Based on the research results, the LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung school is advised to strengthen religious culture as a primary strategy in strengthening character education through a more systematic and sustainable program. Schools need to develop internal policies that support the integration of character values in all educational activities so that the implementation of religious culture is not merely ceremonial, but truly becomes part of school life. Teachers and education personnel are expected to be able to increase the role of role models in shaping students' character because teacher behavior has a significant influence on the process of internalizing moral and religious values. In addition, parents need to be actively involved in character education programs by strengthening communication and synergy between schools and families so that character formation of students can take place consistently. For future researchers, this study can be developed using a quantitative approach or mixed methods to measure the effectiveness of religious culture on the formation of students' character more broadly. Further research can also be directed at developing a

character education model based on Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah that is adaptive to the challenges of the digital era and the social development of modern society.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study is limited to schools within the LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung environment and uses a qualitative approach, so the findings cannot be generalized to all Islamic educational institutions. In addition, the study focuses primarily on the implementation of religious culture in strengthening character education without quantitatively measuring its effectiveness on students' behavioral outcomes. Future research is recommended to apply quantitative or mixed-method approaches involving a larger number of schools and participants. Further studies may also examine the long-term impact of religious culture on students' character development and explore digital-based character education models that remain aligned with Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah values in the modern educational context.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the principals, teachers, and students of LP Ma'arif NU Tulungagung schools for their cooperation and valuable contributions during this research. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues and academic mentors who provided constructive suggestions and support in the completion of this study. The author is equally grateful to all parties who contributed directly or indirectly to the successful completion of this research.

REFERENCES

- Annisa, N., Ismail, A., & Mabruri, M. (2024). Pendidikan Karakter Berbasis Nilai Religius Dalam Pembentukan Perilaku Peserta Didik. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 12(1), 45-58.

- Asmani, J. M. (2018). *Tips Membangun Budaya Religius Di Sekolah*. Yogyakarta: Diva Press.
- Farmawaty, S. (2021). Implementasi Budaya Religius Dalam Penguatan Karakter Peserta Didik di Sekolah Islam. *Jurnal Pendidikan Karakter*, 11(2), 120–132.
- Lickona, T. (2015). *Educating For Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Moleong, L. J. (2021). *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*. Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Muslich, M. (2018). *Pendidikan Karakter: Menjawab Tantangan Krisis Multidimensional*. Jakarta: Bumi Aksara.
- Nata, A. (2017). *Akhlak Tasawuf dan Pendidikan Karakter dalam Islam*. Jakarta: Rajawali Pers.
- Ramadhan, A. (2022). Pengaruh Budaya Religius terhadap Kedisiplinan dan Tanggung Jawab Peserta Didik di Sekolah Islam. *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Keislaman*, 9(2), 87–99.
- Samani, M., & Hariyanto. (2019). *Konsep dan Model Pendidikan Karakter*. Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Sugiyono. (2022). *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, dan R&D*. Bandung: Alfabeta.
- Suyadi. (2020). *Strategi Pembelajaran Pendidikan Karakter*. Bandung: PT Remaja Rosdakarya.

Suminto, Basya

Zubaedi. (2017). *Desain Pendidikan Karakter: Konsepsi dan Aplikasinya dalam Lembaga Pendidikan*. Jakarta: Kencana.