

The Role of Teachers in Shaping the Religious Character of Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of teachers in shaping the religious character of early childhood students at TK Muslimat NU Tahunan Tegalombo. The background of this research is the importance of religious character education from an early age as a foundation for children's moral development, especially in the era of digital media advancement that influences children's behavior. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design, involving teachers, the school principal, and parents as informants. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and then analyzed descriptively. The results indicate that teachers play their roles through value-based religious learning, exemplary behavior, habituation of daily prayers and worship, and consistent interaction with children. This study reveals that the role of teachers is crucial in instilling religious character, discipline, and social awareness in early childhood, thereby forming a strong moral foundation for their future lives.

Keywords: Teacher's Role, Religious Character, Early Childhood, Character Education, Islamic Education.

I. Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) plays a fundamental role in shaping children's character. At this stage, children are in the *golden age* period, characterized by rapid development in cognitive, social-emotional, moral, and spiritual aspects. Therefore, appropriate stimulation is essential to support optimal development. Religious character is one of the crucial aspects that must be instilled early, as it serves as the foundation for developing moral integrity, discipline, honesty, and social responsibility (Mulyasa, 2023). While classical theories such as those proposed by Lickona (1991) remain relevant in explaining the importance of character education, contemporary approaches emphasize the integration of moral values into meaningful daily activities. Islamic-based educational institutions hold a strategic role in instilling religious values from an early age. TK Muslimat NU Tahunan Tegalombo, as an Islamic early childhood institution under Nahdlatul Ulama, seeks to integrate Islamic values into all learning activities. Religious character is not only taught through formal instruction, such as prayer recitation, memorization of short Qur'anic chapters, and worship practices, but also through daily habituation of positive behaviors, including politeness, honesty, and empathy toward others. This approach aligns with the concept of character education, which highlights the importance of habituation and role modeling in shaping children's behavior (Suyadi, 2020).

The challenges of developing children's religious character have become increasingly complex in the digital era of 2025. Children are now exposed to various forms of digital media that provide unrestricted access to information. Exposure to inappropriate content may negatively influence children's behavior and moral development if not accompanied by proper guidance. Therefore, teachers play a crucial role as facilitators,

mentors, and role models in guiding children's moral and spiritual development (Putri & Rahmawati, 2024). Teachers are not merely knowledge transmitters but also agents of character formation. In early childhood education, teachers have multidimensional roles encompassing educational, social, and moral responsibilities. They are expected to create a conducive, engaging, and value-oriented learning environment. Through continuous and meaningful interactions, teachers can instill values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and respect for others. Previous studies indicate that positive teacher-child interactions significantly influence children's character development (Hidayat, 2023).

Instructional approaches used by teachers significantly contribute to shaping children's religious character. Experiential learning and transformative learning approaches enable children to understand moral values more deeply. Hasanah (2022) argues that transformative learning allows children to gain moral understanding through concrete experiences followed by simple reflection, leading to internalization of values in daily behavior. In practice, teachers can integrate religious values through play-based activities, storytelling, singing, and structured daily routines that are enjoyable for children. Moreover, the development of religious character is not an instant process but requires continuous and consistent efforts. Habituation becomes a key strategy in internalizing these values. Routine activities such as praying before and after learning, greeting others, sharing with peers, and maintaining cleanliness represent practical implementations of religious values in children's daily lives. Consistent habituation fosters stable behavioral patterns that eventually become part of the child's character (Wahyuni & Setiawan, 2021).

Collaboration between teachers, parents, and the school environment is essential for the success of religious character education. Children learn not only at school but also at home and within their social environment. Therefore, synergy among stakeholders is necessary to ensure that values taught at school are reinforced at home. Effective communication between teachers and parents helps monitor children's development and maintain consistency in value internalization (Rahman, 2020). Several previous studies have explored the role of teachers in character education; however, most focus on general contexts and rarely address Islamic kindergarten settings, particularly those affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama. Hidayat (2023) found that active teacher involvement in value-based learning improves children's discipline and compliance. Meanwhile, Hasanah (2022) emphasized the importance of transformative learning in helping children understand moral values. Nevertheless, studies specifically examining the practices of religious character formation in TK Muslimat NU remain limited, indicating the need for further investigation.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the role of teachers in shaping the religious character of early childhood learners at TK Muslimat NU Tahunan Tegalombo. The research focuses on how teachers integrate religious values into learning activities and daily interactions. The research question is formulated as follows: *"How do teachers shape the religious character of early childhood students through learning activities and daily interactions at TK Muslimat NU Tahunan Tegalombo?"*. This study is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it contributes to the discourse on religious character education in early childhood, particularly within Islamic educational institutions affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama. Practically, it offers insights and best practices for early childhood educators in designing effective strategies for instilling religious values. Ultimately, it is expected that children will not only achieve academic competence but also develop strong moral character, noble behavior, and the ability to adapt to contemporary challenges.

II. Literature Review

Religious character in early childhood is a fundamental aspect of character education, emphasizing the internalization of faith, worship, and moral values in daily life. Religious character education is not limited to cognitive understanding but also involves affective and psychomotor dimensions, which are reflected in children's behavior (Mulyasa, 2023). In early childhood education, the development of religious character must be carried out holistically using approaches appropriate to children's developmental stages. One effective approach in shaping religious character is habituation. Habituation refers to the continuous

repetition of positive behaviors until they become ingrained in the child's personality. Wahyuni and Setiawan (2021) state that practices such as praying, greeting others, and sharing with peers contribute to the formation of stable religious behavior patterns. Furthermore, habituation enables children to understand moral values concretely through direct daily experiences.

In addition to habituation, teacher role modeling plays a crucial role in character formation. Teachers serve as significant figures who provide real examples of religious values in action. Young children tend to imitate the behavior of adults around them; therefore, teachers' attitudes and actions strongly influence children's character development (Suyadi, 2020). Consistency in demonstrating positive behavior is essential for effective character education. Instructional approaches also play a significant role in religious character education. Experiential learning and transformative learning are considered effective in helping children understand moral values. Hasanah (2022) explains that through direct experience followed by simple reflection, children can internalize religious values more deeply. Activities such as role-playing, storytelling, and practicing worship serve as effective tools for embedding these values.

Moreover, teacher-child interaction is a key component in character development. Positive, warm, and responsive interactions create a supportive learning environment that fosters moral growth. Hidayat (2023) found that active teacher involvement in daily interactions significantly improves children's discipline and adherence to moral values. This indicates that character education occurs not only in formal instruction but also through everyday social interactions. In the digital era, the challenges of religious character education are becoming more complex. Children are increasingly exposed to digital content that may not align with moral and religious values. Therefore, teachers must play an active role in guiding and reinforcing positive values. Putri and Rahmawati (2024) emphasize that integrating character values into learning activities is a crucial strategy in addressing digital-era challenges. In conclusion, the formation of religious character in early childhood is influenced by multiple factors, including habituation, teacher role modeling, instructional approaches, social interaction, and environmental support. This literature review provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing the role of teachers in shaping children's religious character at TK Muslimat NU Tahunan Tegalombo.

III. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at TK Muslimat NU Tahunan Tegalombo in 2025. This approach was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of the role of teachers in shaping the religious character of early childhood, both through instructional activities and daily interactions. The data sources consist of teachers, the school principal, and parents as the main informants. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews to explore teachers' experiences in instilling religious values, participatory observation of children's daily activities, and documentation of learning programs, activity schedules, and instructional media used in the school. The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative techniques, including data reduction, narrative data presentation, and verification through source triangulation. This approach enables the study to comprehensively and contextually describe the practices of strengthening religious character, in alignment with the real experiences of teachers and children.

IV. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The findings from teacher interviews indicate that the development of children's religious character is carried out through Islamic value-based learning activities, such as prayers before and after activities, prophetic storytelling, and the introduction of simple prayer practices. Teachers emphasized the importance of role modeling in daily life, including honesty, discipline, and social care, as children primarily learn through

observation and direct experience. The school principal explained that religious character development is integrated into all school activities, both in classroom learning and outdoor play. Children are taught discipline, responsibility, and cooperation through daily routines such as cleaning the classroom, sharing materials, and maintaining environmental cleanliness.

Parents highlighted the strong communication between teachers and families. Teachers provide guidance on reinforcing religious habits at home, ensuring consistency between school and family environments. This reflects a holistic approach to character education. Observations revealed that learning activities are interactive and engaging. Children actively participate in prayers, religious songs, moral storytelling, and games that promote sharing and empathy. This approach emphasizes experiential learning as a means of internalizing religious values. Documentation, including lesson plans, daily evaluations, and learning media such as storybooks, prayer posters, and character worksheets, supports these findings. Overall, teachers play a central and consistent role in shaping children's religious character through modeling, habituation, and meaningful interaction.

4.2. Discussion

The findings indicate that teachers play a central role in shaping early childhood religious character through a holistic approach involving role modeling, habituation, and social interaction. This aligns with contemporary character education theories, which emphasize that moral values are more effectively internalized through real-life experiences rather than purely cognitive instruction (Berkowitz & Bier, 2016; Mulyasa, 2023). Teachers employ interactive and contextual learning strategies, including storytelling, religious songs, group prayers, and educational games. These approaches align with experiential learning theory, which highlights the importance of direct experience in children's learning processes (Kolb, 2015). Furthermore, these practices support transformative learning, where values are internalized through reflection and meaningful experiences (Taylor & Cranton, 2016; Hasanah, 2022).

Children's active participation demonstrates the effectiveness of character education practices. They not only understand religious values but also apply them in daily life, such as praying, sharing, and respecting others. This is consistent with international research showing that positive teacher-child interactions significantly contribute to children's social and moral development (Pianta et al., 2016; OECD, 2020). Parental involvement also plays a crucial role in reinforcing religious character. Effective communication between teachers and parents ensures consistency in value reinforcement across home and school environments. Studies confirm that parental engagement strengthens children's moral and character development (Epstein, 2018; Sheridan et al., 2019).

Moreover, consistent habituation practices are proven to be effective in shaping children's behavior. Daily routines such as praying, sharing, and maintaining cleanliness help establish stable behavioral patterns. This finding is supported by research emphasizing habituation as a key strategy in early childhood character education (Nucci et al., 2017; Wahyuni & Setiawan, 2021). In conclusion, the development of religious character at TK Muslimat NU Tahunan Tegalombo is conducted in a systematic, consistent, and contextual manner. This approach aligns with modern character education theories and addresses the developmental needs of children in the digital era. Teachers act as key agents in fostering strong and sustainable religious character in early childhood.

V. Conclusion

This study reveals that teachers at TK Muslimat NU Tahunan Tegalombo play a significant role in shaping the religious character of early childhood students. This role is manifested through Islamic value-based learning, providing exemplary good behavior, habituation of daily prayers and worship, and consistent interactions with children. The findings indicate that children not only understand religious concepts theoretically but also begin to apply them in their daily behavior, such as praying, sharing, respecting peers,

and being disciplined. Collaboration between teachers and parents further strengthens the internalization of religious values, making character development more integrated, holistic, and sustainable. Theoretically, these findings align with the principles of character education that emphasize habituation and role modeling, as well as Transformative Learning, which encourages the internalization of values through real-life experiences. This study confirms that religious character education from an early age can build a strong moral foundation, discipline, and social awareness, serving as essential provisions for children's future development.

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