

Religious Character of Elementary School Students in Tasikmalaya Based on the Diversity of Children's Characteristics

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Abstract: Religious character education for elementary school students has become a fundamental necessity in responding to increasingly complex social changes. This study aims to describe and analyze the religious character of third-grade elementary school students in Tasikmalaya by considering the diversity of children's characteristics as the main analytical lens. In this study, such diversity includes differences in emotional regulation, learning styles, levels of independence, and social tendencies among students; however, it does not specifically focus on disabilities or particular special educational needs. Therefore, the findings are situated within the context of mainstream education. Nevertheless, the findings remain relevant to inclusive education as they emphasize the importance of pedagogical approaches that are adaptive and responsive to diverse learning needs. The scope of the study covers five main aspects of religious character: honesty, patience, empathy, sportsmanship, and spiritual reflection. The research employed a descriptive qualitative design involving third-grade students and teachers from two different schools, namely an Integrated Islamic Elementary School (SD IT) and a non-Islamic Integrated elementary school (SD 3 Tugu). Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The results indicate differences in the development of religious character between the two schools. Students in the SD IT demonstrated a higher consistency of religious behavior through structured habituation practices such as morning routines, value reflection, and teacher role modeling. In contrast, students at SD 3 Tugu exhibited a more dynamic development of religious character through game-based learning, although such behaviors were not yet fully stable without teacher guidance. The diversity of children's characteristics was found to influence the extent to which religious values were internalized within different learning contexts. This study concludes that the development of religious character in elementary education requires pedagogically adaptive and inclusive approaches that combine consistent habituation with learning experiences aligned with children's developmental needs in mainstream educational settings.

Keywords: religious character; elementary school; diversity of children's characteristics; habits; game-based learning.

INTRODUCTION

Strengthening religious character education among elementary school students has become a significant focus of education, particularly in regions with strong religious, social, and cultural backgrounds such as Tasikmalaya. Religious character in children is reflected through attitudes, habits, and behaviors that demonstrate obedience to religious teachings, respect for others, and the application of moral values in everyday life (Aumar et al., 2023). The elementary school period is a crucial stage for instilling these values, as children are in the process of building character foundations that will influence their attitudes and behaviors in later life (Maksum et al., 2025).

Previous studies have shown that religious character education can be strengthened through the integration of values into subject matter, daily habituation practices, school culture, and collaboration between schools and families (Solehah et al., 2025). Recent literature also emphasizes that the success of character formation is closely related to the instructional approaches employed by teachers and the extent to which learning experiences are relevant to children's developmental needs (Susanti et al., 2024). In line with the child-centered learning paradigm, effective character education must consider each student's background, experiences, and learning conditions (Uspari & Fadli, 2024).

However, much of the existing research still tends to conceptualize student character in generalized terms and has not sufficiently examined how the diversity of children's characteristics influences the development of religious character (Mufrodah, 2024). In fact, elementary school students demonstrate diversity across cognitive, social, emotional, cultural, learning, and functional domains (Alifah et al., 2025). From an inclusive education perspective, such diversity is understood as a natural condition that must be addressed by the education system in an equitable and non-discriminatory manner, as emphasized in the Salamanca Statement and UNESCO's inclusive education framework, which position inclusion as a rights-based and systemic approach aimed at removing barriers to learning for all children (UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2020).

Inclusive education should not be narrowly interpreted as merely adapting teaching strategies to different learning styles or emotional regulation patterns. Rather, it represents a broader educational paradigm that acknowledges the presence of children with disabilities, special educational needs, and those at risk of marginalization within the education system (Florian, 2014; Ainscow, 2020). Within this framework, religious character education should be designed to reach all learners through flexible, supportive, and responsive learning environments that respect diversity. Although this study was conducted in mainstream elementary schools and does not specifically focus on particular disability groups, its analytical framework is grounded in inclusive education principles. Children with varying abilities, learning needs, and individual characteristics are positioned as part of a continuum of learner diversity that requires responsive and non-uniform pedagogical approaches. Accordingly, this study seeks to move beyond homogeneous perspectives in understanding the development of religious character among elementary school students.

Based on this research gap, the present study offers a novel contribution by analyzing the religious character of elementary school students through the lens of children's diverse characteristics within an inclusive education framework. This perspective highlights that the formation of religious character is influenced not only by instructional design and school culture but also by students' individual profiles and the readiness of educational systems to accommodate diversity in equitable and meaningful ways. Accordingly, the research question guiding this study is: How is the religious character of elementary school students in Tasikmalaya manifested when examined in relation to the diversity of children's characteristics within an inclusive education framework? In line with this question, the study aims to describe and analyze the religious character of elementary school students in Tasikmalaya by considering variations in children's characteristics that shape their responses, behaviors, and processes of internalizing religious values within inclusive elementary school environments.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at describing the religious character of elementary school students based on the diversity of children's characteristics. This approach was chosen because it allows for the exploration of religious character formation as it naturally occurs within school settings and provides an in-depth understanding of how religious character develops through interactions between school-taught values and students' individual characteristics.

Participants and Research Context

The participants were drawn from two elementary schools in Tasikmalaya, Indonesia: one Integrated Islamic Elementary School (SD IT) and one non-Islamic Integrated elementary school (SD 3 Tugu). The schools were selected purposively to represent different school cultures and approaches to religious education, enabling a meaningful comparative analysis. The study focused on third-grade students in both schools, as this developmental stage represents a transition in social-emotional development during which patterns of religious value internalization begin to stabilize.

The diversity of student characteristics examined in this study included variations in emotional regulation, learning styles, levels of independence, and social interaction tendencies. The research was conducted within mainstream educational settings and did not specifically target or classify students with disabilities or particular special educational needs. However, when students with diverse learning needs were present in the classroom, they were regarded as part of the natural diversity of learners without labeling or discriminatory treatment. In addition to students, third-grade classroom teachers from both schools participated in the study due to their central role in shaping students' religious character through instruction, habituation practices, and daily interactions.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations focused on classroom instruction, religious routines, and students' social interactions within the school environment to identify naturally occurring religious behaviors. In-depth interviews were conducted with third-grade teachers and selected students from each school to explore their perspectives on religious practices, habituation activities, and factors influencing the development of religious character in relation to diverse student characteristics. Documentation included school records, religious habituation program documents, photographs of activities, and other relevant archival materials that supported the field data.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024). During data reduction, the collected data were selected, categorized, and focused on themes related to religious character and variations in third-grade students' characteristics. Data display was conducted through descriptive narratives and thematic patterns illustrating the relationships between students' religious behaviors and individual differences across the two school cultures. Conclusions were drawn iteratively throughout the research process, supported by triangulation of data sources and data collection techniques to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles in educational research were carefully observed, particularly given the involvement of young children as participants. Informed consent was obtained from school authorities and parents or guardians prior to data collection. In addition, child assent was obtained orally using age-appropriate and easily understandable language. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms or codes, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Throughout the research process, care was taken to ensure that observations and interviews did not disrupt students' learning activities or pose psychological, social, or emotional risks to participants.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding(s)

The findings indicate that the religious character of third-grade students in the two elementary schools in Tasikmalaya develops through different patterns shaped by school culture, teachers' habituation practices, and the diversity of children's developmental characteristics. These differences are not interpreted as indicators of superior or inferior character formation, but rather as diverse developmental pathways that reflect variations in learning pace, needs, and learner profiles.

Based on data from classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student interviews, the SD IT environment tends to facilitate the internalization of religious values through structured and consistent habituation practices. In contrast, SD 3 Tugu demonstrates a more variable and situational development of religious character through game-based learning, which provides broader opportunities for emotional expression and social interaction.

Table 1. Summary of Observation Results on Students' Religious Character

Aspect	SD IT TQ Al Hasan	SD 3 Tugu (Non-IT)
Honesty	Admitting mistakes spontaneously and openly.	Often hesitant to admit mistakes; waiting for the teacher's instructions.
Patience	Queue orderly; emotional regulation is fairly stable.	Still fighting; easily disappointed when losing.
Empathy	Helping friends spontaneously.	Empathy arises when requested by the teacher.
Sportivitas	Accepting the results gracefully.	Some cry or get angry when they lose.
Spiritual reflection	Able to explain the wisdom behind the activity.	Reflection occurs when guided by a teacher.

Observationally, third-grade students at SD IT demonstrated relatively consistent religious behaviors across various learning and social situations. For example, when a student accidentally broke a classmate's pencil, the student approached the teacher and quietly said that he "wanted to be honest because Allah knows everything." This statement reflects an internalized moral awareness that guides decision-making. Similar behaviors were repeatedly observed in other contexts, reinforced through habituation practices such as *pijakan pagi* (morning grounding activities), during which students calm themselves and recall faith-based values before lessons begin. Throughout instruction, religious values were subtly integrated into learning activities, and students routinely expressed gratitude at the conclusion of lessons.

In contrast, the learning atmosphere at SD 3 Tugu was more dynamic and heavily characterized by play-based activities. Game-based learning served as a primary medium for interaction, engagement, and emotional expression. During a group game session, several students appeared disappointed and expressed anger when they lost. The teacher responded by calming them and saying, "Losing is a way of learning, not something to be sad about." Students' responses to this guidance varied, indicating that emotional regulation and the internalization of sportsmanship values were still in progress and required ongoing support.

Teacher interviews further reinforced these findings. A teacher at SD IT explained that she consistently reminded students that "Allah knows everything even when the teacher does not see," which encouraged students to admit mistakes without external pressure. In contrast, the teacher at SD 3 Tugu stated that honesty was often taught through stories or dialogue during games, although some students were still reluctant to admit mistakes before receiving guidance. Similarly, regarding patience, the SD IT teacher noted that students were accustomed to "waiting until their peers finish speaking," whereas the SD 3 Tugu teacher

explained that “the children sometimes compete for turns because the learning activities are active and involve a lot of movement.”

Student interviews also revealed clear differences in how religious values were understood and expressed. A student from SD IT stated, “If I make a mistake, I admit it because the teacher says Allah knows,” indicating an internally motivated orientation toward moral values. In contrast, a student from SD 3 Tugu said that they admitted mistakes “when the teacher tells me to.” Regarding empathy, an SD IT student explained that they liked “helping friends who are sad so they can feel encouraged again,” whereas an SD 3 Tugu student said they helped others “when the teacher tells me to.” These differences suggest that inconsistency in religious behavior should not be interpreted as weak character formation, but rather as part of a broader spectrum of developmental diversity. Students who continue to rely on teacher guidance may be experiencing a developmentally appropriate stage of learning values through external support, aligned with their individual learning needs and emotional development.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that both structured religious habituation and game-based learning play meaningful roles in fostering religious character, albeit in ways that support different learner profiles. Structured approaches tend to benefit students who thrive with clarity and routine, while play-based approaches provide space for learners who develop values through experience, social interaction, and emotional exploration. Accordingly, variability in the development of religious character should be understood as developmental diversity within an inclusive education framework, rather than as a deficit or failure in character formation.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the development of students’ religious character at the elementary school level is strongly influenced by school culture, the intensity of habituation practices, and the instructional approaches employed by teachers. At the Islamic Integrated Elementary School (SD IT), religious character developed more consistently due to the implementation of a structured habituation system, including morning grounding activities, value reflection, teacher role modeling, and stable daily routines. These findings align with Lickona’s character education theory, which emphasizes habitual practice as the core mechanism for internalizing moral values (Shifana et al., 2025). Character values are not merely transmitted through instruction but must be modeled, repeated, and reinforced through everyday interactions (Khofifah & Mufarochah, 2022). Moreover, the integration of tauhid (Islamic monotheistic values) into all learning activities at SD IT reflects Thomas’s (2011) view that religious-based character education is rooted in spiritual belief as a foundational source of moral guidance.

In contrast, students’ religious character at SD 3 Tugu developed within a more dynamic, play-oriented, and collaborative learning environment. The dominant use of game-based learning provided opportunities for students to engage in spontaneous interaction, emotional expression, and natural social experiences. This finding is consistent with Vygotsky’s theory, which positions play as a critical context for children’s social-emotional development, where they learn emotional regulation, cooperation, and perspective-taking (Lestari et al., 2024). However, play-based approaches do not always offer systematically structured moments for moral reflection. As a result, the internalization of religious values emerged situationally and was less stable compared to the structured habituation observed at SD IT. Importantly, this variability should not be interpreted as a deficiency, but rather as

evidence of diverse developmental pathways shaped by school culture and individual learning styles.

Differences in religious character development between the two schools can also be explained through Kohlberg's moral development theory (Hasanah, 2019). At the third-grade level, many students remain in the early conventional stage of moral reasoning, in which moral behavior is guided primarily by external rules, authority figures, and the desire for social approval (Enggal et al., 2023). In the SD IT context, high levels of structured habituation function as moral scaffolding, enabling students to move more rapidly toward internalized and self-regulated moral behavior. Conversely, at SD 3 Tugu, moral values are primarily constructed through social interaction and play experiences, resulting in more varied developmental outcomes that are closely linked to students' individual characteristics.

The diversity of children's developmental characteristics emerges as a central finding with direct implications for inclusive education. According to Piaget, during the concrete operational stage (ages 7–11), children's cognitive development, emotional regulation, and social perspective-taking do not progress uniformly (Asmara & Rulyansah, 2024). These differences become especially salient in inclusive classrooms that include students with emotional regulation challenges, cognitive difficulties, or social communication barriers, including students with disabilities. Structured habituation approaches, such as those implemented at SD IT, may be particularly supportive for students who require predictability, clear expectations, and consistent routines such as learners with attention difficulties or emotional regulation challenges. Consistent structures help these students gradually understand and internalize religious behavioral expectations within a secure learning environment.

Conversely, play-based learning approaches, such as those practiced at SD 3 Tugu, may be advantageous for students who learn best through experiential, social, and emotionally rich interactions, including students with social or communication difficulties who benefit from authentic opportunities to practice empathy and cooperation. However, without intentional reflective scaffolding, students with certain disabilities may struggle to generalize religious values learned through play into broader daily contexts. This highlights that moral development in inclusive classrooms follows multiple, non-linear pathways rather than a single standardized trajectory. These findings reinforce the understanding that inclusive education in the context of religious character development should not be viewed merely as pedagogical differentiation, but as a rights-based framework that ensures all children have equitable opportunities to develop in accordance with their unique needs and potentials. In line with UNESCO's (2017) inclusive education framework, high-quality education requires schools to adapt learning environments, instructional strategies, and habituation systems to accommodate learner diversity, including disability, without framing differences as deficits (Marjanen et al., 2018).

Overall, this study underscores that the development of religious character is shaped by the complex interaction of school culture, teacher habituation practices, instructional approaches, and individual developmental diversity. Schools with strong religious cultures and structured habituation systems tend to foster more consistent character development, while play-oriented schools offer rich opportunities for social and emotional learning. Therefore, religious character education in inclusive elementary classrooms should integrate both approaches consistent habituation and meaningful, joyful learning experiences—while providing reflective supports that ensure all students, including those with disabilities, can internalize religious values in a meaningful and equitable manner.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the religious character of third-grade elementary students in Tasikmalaya is shaped through the interaction of school culture, teacher habituation practices, instructional approaches, and the diversity of students' individual characteristics. Students in the Islamic Integrated Elementary School (SD IT) demonstrated more stable religious character development due to structured habituation and consistent teacher role modeling. In contrast, students at SD 3 Tugu showed more dynamic development through play-based learning that emphasized social interaction, although this approach was not consistently supported by sustained reflective routines.

These differences represent diverse moral developmental pathways rather than deficits. Variations in emotional regulation, learning styles, and social tendencies indicate that religious value internalization requires adaptive and inclusive approaches. Therefore, religious character education should be framed within inclusive education principles that respect diverse abilities and learning needs, including those of students requiring additional support or with disabilities. The findings highlight the need for inclusive school policies and teacher professional development that integrate religious character education with inclusive pedagogy. Equipping teachers with flexible strategies that combine structured habituation and experiential learning is essential to ensure that religious character education is accessible and meaningful for all students.

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