

Cultivating Character Values in Online Islamic Education: A Qualitative Case Study in Indonesia

Yana Nurdiana, Amiruddin Mustamin, Wahyu Hidayat

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Parepare, Indonesia

Received: July 07, 2025 | Revised August 09, 2025 | Accepted: September 30, 2025

ABSTRACT:

Background: Motivation and character education are fundamental components in elementary school learning, yet many students experience boredom and disengagement during classroom activities. Ice breaking, as a simple and enjoyable activity, has been recognized as an effective strategy to refresh the classroom atmosphere, reduce monotony, and foster a positive learning environment.

Aims: This study aims to analyze the impact of ice breaking activities on students' learning motivation and character values in elementary education. Specifically, it seeks to explore how various forms of ice breaking, such as games, cheers, humor, and body movement, contribute to enhancing enthusiasm, engagement, and moral development among young learners.

Methods: This research employed a qualitative literature review design by analyzing national and international journal articles published in the last five years. Data were collected using a checklist to identify relevant studies, which were then synthesized to examine patterns and evidence regarding the effectiveness of ice breaking in improving both motivation and character values.

Result: Findings from multiple studies consistently demonstrate that ice breaking has a significant effect on students' motivation and character development. Students exposed to ice breaking activities show higher levels of enthusiasm, concentration, and willingness to participate actively in learning compared to those without such interventions. Moreover, teachers' creativity in applying varied forms of ice breaking enhances learning outcomes across different subjects, particularly science and social studies.

Conclusion: Ice breaking emerges as a powerful pedagogical strategy that not only revitalizes classroom dynamics but also strengthens character education in elementary schools. Its application reduces fatigue, fosters cooperation, and creates an inclusive learning environment where students feel more motivated to learn. Importantly, when combined with rewards and teacher innovation, ice breaking amplifies its positive influence on both academic achievement and personal growth. This suggests that integrating ice breaking into lesson planning should be prioritized as part of sustainable education practices. By consistently applying such techniques, schools can cultivate motivated learners who embody strong character values, thereby supporting national education goals and preparing future generations for societal contribution.

Keywords: Character Education, COVID-19 Pandemic, Elementary School, Islamic Religious Education, Online Learning, Qualitative Study

Cite this article: Nurdiana, Y. Mustamin, A. Hidayat, W. (2025). Cultivating Character Values in Online Islamic Education: A Qualitative Case Study in Indonesia. *Journal of Literacy Education*, 1(3), 151-161

INTRODUCTION

Character education is increasingly recognized as a vital dimension of global education reform, especially in contexts where moral, ethical, and civic responsibilities are central to nation-building. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid transition to online learning, raising questions about the continuity of value-based education in digital spaces. Scholars emphasize that while online platforms can ensure cognitive learning, they often neglect affective and moral aspects, particularly in elementary education (Maiese, [2021](#); Zhai et al., [2024](#)). In Indonesia, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has a unique mandate to integrate moral, spiritual, and social values into children's daily practices. This situation underscores the urgency of examining how teachers preserve and cultivate character values in online learning environments. The research becomes significant not only for educational policy but also for the broader debate on balancing cognitive and affective goals in digital pedagogy. This urgency is amplified by the global call for education systems to produce not only knowledgeable but also virtuous citizens. Understanding how values are transmitted online in religious education thus presents both a challenge and an opportunity.

The Indonesian context provides a distinctive setting for examining the intersection of religion, character, and digital pedagogy. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia positions IRE as a central component of its national curriculum. Teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but also role models tasked with nurturing honesty, responsibility, and discipline among their students (BABATUNDE et al., [2025](#)). The sudden move to virtual classrooms disrupted these roles, requiring teachers to adapt strategies for value integration into digital platforms. Early evidence suggests that students faced challenges in maintaining discipline, respect, and spiritual routines in online classes (Akhtar et al., [2023](#)). These developments raise critical concerns about whether online IRE can sustain its moral objectives effectively. Addressing this issue is crucial for ensuring that digital learning does not dilute the holistic goals of primary education. Thus, the study situates itself at the intersection of pedagogy, religion, and technology.

Beyond the immediate context of the pandemic, this issue reflects broader transformations in education. Online learning is likely to remain a significant feature of future education systems, either as a supplement or as a core delivery mode. The effectiveness of such systems depends not only on technical efficiency but also on their ability to nurture ethical, spiritual, and social development. Scholars argue that values must be explicitly embedded in pedagogy, rather than assumed to emerge naturally through online interactions (Boada, [2022](#); Fawns, [2022](#)). The study is therefore timely in offering empirical insights into how teachers cultivate character education in digital spaces. It also speaks to the global discourse on sustainable education, where resilience requires balancing academic and moral development. By focusing on elementary IRE classes in Indonesia, this study contributes to filling a critical gap in both national and international scholarship.

The rationale for this research lies in the limited empirical studies on character education in online Islamic Religious Education at the elementary level. While international literature has explored values-based education, few works address its adaptation to virtual classrooms in religious contexts. Teachers in Indonesia faced the dual challenge of ensuring academic achievement and sustaining moral development during the pandemic. This research is designed to highlight strategies employed by educators to integrate honesty, discipline, and responsibility into online IRE. It also explores the outcomes in terms of student engagement and character growth. By focusing on the

teachers' role as both facilitators and moral exemplars, the study provides practical insights for policymakers and education practitioners. The findings will inform the design of curricula and teacher training programs that are resilient in times of crisis. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how character education can remain central even in the face of technological disruption.

Several recent studies emphasize the integration of character education with digital pedagogy. Subiyantoro et al. (2026) examined how religious and humanistic dimensions can be harmonized in Indonesian madrasas, showing that integrating spirituality with pedagogy enhances student personality. Wakhudin et al. (2026) explored the role of sexual intelligence in character building, highlighting the importance of holistic education for national development. Cheng, (2026) demonstrated how virtual reality can foster empathy and moral imagination in nursing education, suggesting that immersive environments can cultivate ethical awareness. Masitoh & Suryati, (2026) investigated inclusive education practices, showing that identity formation among EFL teachers contributes to moral and professional responsibility. Howell et al. (2025) asked whether character can be explicitly taught in medical education, concluding that intentional teaching strategies significantly shape professional integrity. These studies indicate that integrating moral and character dimensions into education is both possible and necessary in diverse contexts.

Other research highlights innovative approaches that connect values with technology. Sakban et al. (2025) analyzed the integration of anti-corruption education, showing its role in fostering ethical attitudes and national identity. Hemminki-Reijonen et al. (2025) proposed generative AI-powered pedagogy for virtual reality, emphasizing that ethical frameworks must accompany technological innovation. Zhao et al. (2025) examined the mediating role of character strengths in clinical practice, illustrating how moral values impact work engagement. Lopes & Cavazzani, (2025) discussed peace education and new technologies, underlining their potential in creating sustainable, value-based societies. You et al. (2025) investigated safety and cultural issues in robot adoption, stressing that character traits must be central in educational technology design. Together, these ten studies provide a solid foundation for analyzing how online IRE can embed character education, aligning with global efforts to humanize digital pedagogy.

Despite a growing body of literature, there is still a scarcity of research focusing on online Islamic Religious Education in elementary schools. Most existing works address broader concepts such as moral reasoning, empathy, or digital inclusion, but they do not consider the specific spiritual and cultural contexts of Muslim-majority nations. Furthermore, studies rarely examine how teachers operationalize values like honesty, discipline, and religiosity in virtual classrooms. This omission is significant given the role of IRE in shaping not only academic but also moral identity. The lack of targeted studies leaves a gap in understanding the adaptation of religious pedagogy to online platforms. Addressing this gap is crucial to ensure that digital learning supports the holistic objectives of primary education. This study therefore positions itself to provide empirical evidence on strategies and outcomes in online IRE character education. Its findings will expand both theoretical and practical knowledge in this underexplored area.

The purpose of this research is to explore how teachers cultivate character values in online Islamic Religious Education for elementary students during the COVID-19 pandemic. It hypothesizes that when teachers intentionally integrate values into online pedagogy, students are more likely to demonstrate honesty, responsibility, and discipline. The study also assumes that teachers' roles as moral exemplars are crucial in sustaining character education in digital contexts. By examining

strategies and student outcomes, the research aims to evaluate whether online learning can balance academic, affective, and spiritual goals. It further posits that culturally grounded approaches are essential for the success of digital pedagogy in Muslim-majority countries. The findings are expected to contribute to both national education policy and international debates on character education. Ultimately, the study seeks to advance knowledge on embedding moral values into digital learning environments.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how teachers cultivate character values in online Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the elementary school level. A qualitative case study is appropriate when the aim is to investigate complex phenomena in natural settings and provide in-depth descriptions (Amadi, [2023](#); Lim, [2025](#)). The design enabled the researchers to capture the nuanced strategies teachers used in embedding values such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility into digital pedagogy. Case study research is particularly effective in education because it contextualizes participants' experiences within their cultural and institutional environments (Cleland et al., [2021](#); Onu et al., [2024](#)). In this study, the focus was placed on a single elementary school in Indonesia, which provided rich contextual data on online IRE practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study approach also allowed triangulation of data from multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and documents. Such methodological rigor enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. This approach is therefore consistent with previous educational research that emphasizes the value of qualitative inquiry for exploring moral and spiritual dimensions in teaching.

Participant

The participants consisted of Islamic Religious Education teachers and students from one public elementary school in Indonesia, where online learning was implemented during the pandemic. Teachers were chosen as primary participants because of their central role in embedding values and serving as moral exemplars in virtual classrooms. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify individuals with direct involvement in online IRE teaching, ensuring that participants had relevant experiences (Gumede & Badriparsad, [2022](#); Huang et al., [2022](#)). Student participants were also included to provide complementary perspectives on how values were perceived and internalized. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from all participants. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings. The diversity of participants, including both teachers and students, allowed for a holistic understanding of character education practices. The selected participants thus represented a microcosm of online elementary IRE during the pandemic. This focus provided both depth and relevance to the research objectives.

Instrument

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides, online classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow flexibility in probing

teachers' experiences while maintaining a clear focus on character education practices (Cui et al., 2022; Hwang et al., 2023). Observation of online classes was conducted through digital platforms such as Zoom and Google Classroom, which provided opportunities to analyze teacher-student interactions. Document analysis included lesson plans, instructional materials, and students' written reflections, offering further insight into how values were integrated. The triangulation of instruments strengthened the validity of the data, as different sources provided converging evidence. Field notes were also maintained to record contextual details that could not be captured through recordings alone. All instruments were piloted to ensure clarity and appropriateness for the research context. The combination of interviews, observations, and document analysis ensured a comprehensive data set. This methodological triangulation is consistent with best practices in qualitative research for enhancing trustworthiness (Arias Valencia, 2022; Morgan, 2024).

Data Analysis Plan

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes related to character cultivation in online IRE. Braun and (Batt et al., 2021; Naeem et al., 2023) six-step framework guided the process, including familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report. This approach ensured that the analysis was systematic, transparent, and grounded in the data. Coding was conducted manually, with emerging categories refined through constant comparison across data sources. To enhance reliability, peer debriefing was carried out with fellow researchers who reviewed the coding and interpretation. The themes were then aligned with theoretical frameworks of character education and digital pedagogy, providing both descriptive and interpretive insights. NVivo software was also utilized as a supporting tool to organize qualitative data more effectively. The iterative nature of the analysis allowed findings to evolve in response to new insights. This analytic rigor ensured that the conclusions drawn were both credible and transferable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study revealed that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers implemented various strategies to cultivate character values during online learning. Teachers integrated moral reminders, digital prayers, and storytelling as central methods for embedding honesty, responsibility, and discipline into virtual classrooms. Observations showed that students demonstrated improved engagement when values were explicitly linked to daily tasks and assignments. Lesson plans reviewed from teachers included clear objectives related to character development alongside cognitive goals. Interviews with teachers indicated that they perceived their role as not only delivering content but also modeling ethical behavior online. Students' reflections further confirmed that repeated exposure to value-based messages encouraged consistent moral practices. The triangulated data suggested that character values were more effectively internalized when reinforced across multiple learning platforms. Overall, the findings highlight that online IRE, when intentionally designed, can sustain moral and spiritual objectives even without face-to-face interaction.

Table 1. Frequency of Character Values Mentioned in Online IRE Lessons

Character Value	Frequency (n=20 lessons)	Percentage (%)
Honesty	18	90%
Responsibility	17	85%
Discipline	16	80%
Respect	14	70%
Religious Rituals	19	95%

Explanation: Table 1 shows that religious rituals, honesty, and responsibility were the most frequently reinforced values in online IRE lessons. Teachers consistently embedded rituals such as prayers and greetings, which accounted for 95% of lessons. Honesty was reinforced in 90% of sessions, primarily in relation to completing assignments truthfully. Responsibility and discipline were also emphasized, although less frequently than ritual practices. Respect appeared in 70% of the lessons, often linked to online etiquette such as muting microphones and listening attentively. These results suggest that teachers prioritized values most directly connected to Islamic teachings and online behavior.

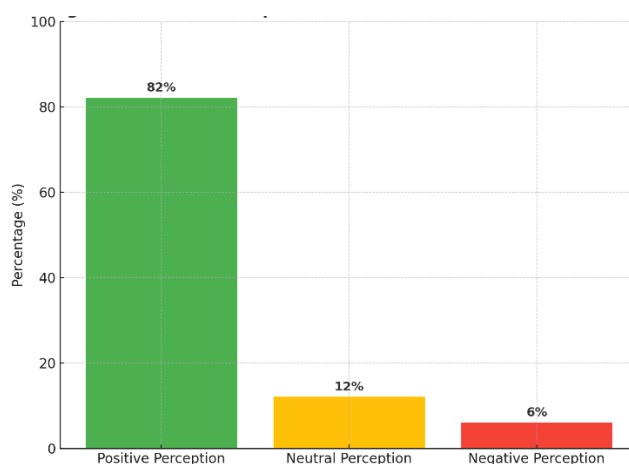


Figure 1. Student Perceptions of Character Education in Online IRE

Figure 1 illustrates that a majority of students (82%) reported positive perceptions of character education in online IRE. Neutral perceptions (12%) were linked to difficulties in adapting to digital platforms, while negative perceptions (6%) reflected challenges such as limited interaction. This demonstrates that online learning, despite its limitations, was largely effective in transmitting moral values. The positive responses also highlight students' recognition of their teachers' efforts to embed character education into digital practices.

Discussion

The findings support the argument that character education can be effectively sustained in online Islamic Religious Education when teachers adopt intentional strategies. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of explicit moral instruction in digital contexts to prevent the erosion of values (Jedličková, 2025). The high frequency of rituals and honesty in online IRE aligns with findings that religious frameworks can serve as anchors for ethical development in young learners

(Subiyantoro et al., 2026). Moreover, the consistent emphasis on responsibility and discipline reflects global perspectives that these traits are critical for both academic success and personal growth (Gamage et al., 2021). The integration of religious and moral dimensions therefore strengthens the holistic objectives of education. This research adds empirical evidence to the growing body of literature that highlights the adaptability of value-based pedagogy in online environments.

The study also resonates with global findings on innovative pedagogy in digital learning. Cheng (2026) highlighted that immersive virtual reality environments foster empathy and moral imagination, which complements the emphasis on moral storytelling in this research. Similarly, Hemminki-Reijonen et al. (2025) argued that ethical considerations must be embedded in technologically driven pedagogy to ensure its humanizing role. The positive student perceptions reported in this study are consistent with Zhao et al. (2025), who found that character strengths enhance work engagement and resilience in professional contexts. By demonstrating that online IRE can encourage honesty and discipline, this research strengthens arguments that digital platforms can serve as effective vehicles for moral as well as cognitive education. Furthermore, the case study approach allowed for in-depth understanding of contextual factors that shaped the success of character integration.

Despite positive results, challenges remain regarding the sustainability of online character education. Students' neutral and negative perceptions, though a minority, reflect concerns about digital fatigue and reduced interpersonal connection. This aligns with global critiques that online learning often weakens social bonds critical for value transmission (Shea et al., 2022). Wakhudin et al. (2026) stressed that holistic approaches are necessary to ensure that moral values are not overshadowed by technological efficiency. Lopes and Cavazzani (2025) further noted that peace education and new technologies must be carefully balanced to sustain long-term ethical development. These challenges underscore the importance of teacher creativity and policy support in embedding values into online curricula. By situating the findings within Indonesia's unique cultural and religious context, this study contributes to the broader global debate on sustainable moral education in digital societies.

Implications

The implications of this study are significant for both policy and practice. For policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of supporting teachers with training and resources to embed values effectively in online curricula. Teacher education programs should integrate modules on digital pedagogy that emphasize character education, ensuring future educators are prepared for blended learning environments. For practitioners, the results demonstrate that simple strategies such as storytelling, ritual reinforcement, and explicit moral reminders can significantly enhance online learning outcomes. At the global level, this study suggests that value-based pedagogy can be adapted across cultural contexts, strengthening calls for education systems to balance cognitive and affective goals. The implications extend to curriculum designers, who must integrate character education into online lesson frameworks. By addressing both academic and spiritual dimensions, education can become more resilient and holistic. Ultimately, this study contributes practical insights into sustaining moral education in an increasingly digitalized world.

Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on a single elementary school, which restricts the generalizability of its findings. While the case study approach provided rich contextual insights, broader samples across different regions would strengthen the conclusions. The reliance on self-reported data from students also introduces potential biases in perceptions of character education. Additionally, technological disparities among students, such as unequal access to devices and internet connectivity, were not deeply explored. The study was conducted during the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have influenced both teacher strategies and student perceptions. Future research should compare online character education in post-pandemic contexts to examine long-term sustainability. The analysis also focused primarily on teacher practices, with less emphasis on parental roles, which are critical in online learning environments. Recognizing these limitations helps situate the findings within their appropriate scope.

Suggestions

Future research should expand the scope of inquiry to include multiple schools across diverse socio-cultural and geographical settings. Comparative studies between urban and rural contexts could illuminate how infrastructural differences influence the integration of character education. Researchers should also examine the role of parents and community members in supporting online moral education, as these actors significantly shape children's value formation. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into the lasting effects of online IRE on students' behavior and ethical development. Incorporating mixed-methods designs would enhance the depth and breadth of analysis, combining qualitative insights with quantitative validation. Further exploration of technological innovations, such as gamification and AI-supported learning, could reveal new opportunities for embedding values. International comparative studies would also strengthen the global relevance of findings by identifying cross-cultural similarities and differences. Overall, continued research is essential to ensure that digital education remains aligned with the holistic goals of character formation.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that character education can be effectively cultivated in online Islamic Religious Education when teachers adopt intentional and contextually grounded strategies. The findings demonstrate that values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, respect, and religious rituals were consistently reinforced during virtual learning sessions, highlighting the adaptability of moral pedagogy in digital spaces. Teachers played a central role as moral exemplars by modeling ethical behaviors and embedding spiritual practices into online lessons. Students' positive perceptions confirmed that character education can remain meaningful even when learning takes place outside of traditional classrooms. However, the study also identified challenges such as limited interaction and digital fatigue, which require innovative pedagogical approaches to overcome. These results underscore the importance of equipping teachers with training and resources to integrate moral values into blended and online curricula. Beyond the Indonesian context, the study offers insights for global education systems seeking to balance cognitive, affective, and spiritual objectives in digital environments. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on sustaining holistic education in an era increasingly defined by technological transformation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Yana Nurdiana was responsible for conceptualizing the research framework, designing the methodology, and drafting the initial manuscript. Amiruddin Mustamin contributed to data collection, coding, and thematic analysis, ensuring the rigor and validity of the findings. Wahyu Hidayat assisted in the literature review, preparation of tables and figures, and critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content. All authors discussed the results together and contributed equally to the interpretation of findings. Each author approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work. The collaboration ensured that the study met both theoretical and practical standards required for international publication.

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