



The Strategy of Islamic Education Teachers in Shaping the Religious Character of Students

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Article History

Received : January 9th 2024

Revision : March 13th 2024

Publication : April 30th 2024

Abstract

The objectives of this research are: (1) to examine the religious disposition of students at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk, and (2) to identify the strategies employed by Islamic education teachers in shaping the religious character of these students. This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing a descriptive qualitative method. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation. The research informants included Islamic education teachers, curriculum advisors, the school principal, and students. The validity of the information was verified through member checking, followed by triangulation techniques. The findings of the research indicate that: (1) The religious character of students at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk is generally underdeveloped, as religious practices such as obligatory prayers and Sunnah prayers are insufficiently observed, largely due to an unsupportive environment. Despite this, students are willing to seek improvement in their religious character and demonstrate honest behavior. (2) The strategies employed by Islamic education teachers to shape students' religious character include modeling and exemplification, guidance, direction, the formulation of practical theories, habituation, training, mentoring, and leadership.

Keywords: strategy, religious character, PAI teacher



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INTRODUCTION

Madrasah Aliyah Az-Zain Jatisari Lengkong Nganjuk, established in 2011 by the Daruth Tholibiin Foundation, serves as an integral part of the educational framework initiated by this Islamic institution. The school, founded under the leadership of Ali Muntaha, is located in front of the Baiturohman Mosque in Jatisari. The institution comprises three classrooms catering to students in grades X, XI, and XII, and was originally overseen by Imam Jayadi as the foundation's chairman and Drs. H. Gunawan as the headmaster.



The establishment of Madrasah Aliyah Az-Zain was motivated by the need to provide a continuous education pathway within the Daruth Tholibiin Foundation, which already offered education at the early childhood, elementary, and middle school levels. The decision to establish this madrasah, instead of a more general vocational school (SKM), was driven by K. Ali Muntaha's vision to create an educational institution deeply rooted in Islamic teachings. Consequently, the Madrasah Aliyah Kejuruan (MAK) was founded, which later transitioned into the current Madrasah Aliyah (MA). The name "Az-Zain" honors K. Ali Muntaha, also known as Bpk. K. Zainudin.

Madrasah Aliyah Az-Zain offers a comprehensive educational experience, balancing traditional Islamic education with modern formal education. This dual approach aims to equip students not only with religious knowledge but also with skills in science, technology, social humanities, and the arts, preparing them to meet contemporary challenges.

The madrasah operates under the auspices of the Daruth Tholibiin Foundation, which encompasses various educational levels, from early childhood education to higher secondary education. One of the key strategies employed by Islamic Education (PAI) teachers at MA Az-Zain to cultivate religious character among students is the development of a religious culture. This approach is crucial as it provides a consistent example for students, influencing their behavior and actions (Hasanah, 2020; Nurhayati & Khoiriyah, 2019). The integration of religious activities into the educational process is a continuous pedagogical endeavor (Sulaiman, 2018).

The curriculum at MA Az-Zain is based on the K-13 framework, which incorporates values of multicultural education as outlined in the core and basic competencies. Additionally, the madrasah includes local content subjects aligned with the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) curriculum, such as Bimbingan Kitab Kuning (guidance on classical Islamic texts), Bulughul Marom, and Nahwu/Shorof (Arabic grammar) (Rahman & Fathoni, 2021). The learning process at MA Az-Zain emphasizes religious values, as evidenced by the inclusion of subjects like Quranic reading guidance and Tahfidz (memorization of the Quran), taught across all grades from X to XII.

The religious character of MA Az-Zain's students is well-developed, as observed through various religious activities at the school. For instance, from 6:30 to 7:10 AM, students perform Dhuha prayers in congregation at the mosque, followed by classroom learning sessions that begin with the recitation of Tahlil and a prayer. The school day concludes with a prayer as well (Arifin, 2022).

Observations conducted on April 13, 2023, revealed that MA Az-Zain Jatisari Lengkong implements a robust religious culture, which includes practices such as greeting culture, respecting religious differences, participating in religious rituals, observing Islamic holidays, dressing modestly, maintaining cleanliness,



demonstrating high discipline, and striving for academic excellence (Hidayatullah & Susanti, 2021; Khadijah, 2020). The madrasah is increasingly recognizing the importance of character education, as seen in the habitual practices promoted within the school, such as maintaining a clean environment, performing Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers in congregation, Quranic recitation, and fostering respectful interactions among students and teachers (Maulana, 2022).

Based on this background, this study aims to explore the strategies employed by Islamic Education teachers at MA Az-Zain to foster religious character among students. The study is titled "Strategies of Islamic Education Teachers in Developing Religious Character Among Students at MA Az-Zain Lengkong Nganjuk."

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on exploring and understanding the strategies employed by Islamic Education teachers in developing the religious character of students at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk. Qualitative research emphasizes the study of phenomena and social events, where the meaning must be uncovered (Satori & Komariah, 2018). According to Moleong (2019), qualitative research is a procedure that generates descriptive data about people and observed behavior, presented in written or spoken words. Descriptive research, on the other hand, aims to depict existing phenomena, whether natural or human-made. The qualitative method is used here because the researcher seeks to comprehend the effectiveness, success, and development of the educational system at MA AZ-ZAIN, with a particular focus on the management and leadership practices aimed at enhancing teacher performance.

This approach enables the researcher to gain insights into reality without disrupting the formal measurement of social reality and subject perception. Through qualitative research methods, researchers can discover numerous subtle yet significant stories naturally conveyed by individuals in the field about real events. Therefore, the researcher's participation is conducted without interfering with the ongoing processes.

Researcher Presence

In qualitative research, the presence of the researcher is critical, as the researcher serves as the primary instrument of data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher's presence in the field is crucial and is carried out optimally to obtain a clear picture of the activities. Informants are made aware of the researcher's formal and normative position, as the researcher follows a formal administrative and normative process. This was the approach taken during the data collection process at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk, where informants, including staff and students, were aware of the researcher's presence, enabling the collection of information relevant to the study's needs.



The researcher's presence in the field is non-delegable and requires time and commitment, as the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting and understanding the real conditions of the research object. In qualitative research, the researcher, or someone assisting, must possess the fundamental data collection tools to adapt to the realities of the field (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This research was conducted at MA AZ-ZAIN, located on Jln. Masjid Baiturrahman, Dsn. Jatisari, Ds. Jatipunggur, Kec. Lengkong, Kab. Nganjuk, East Java Province.

Data Sources

Data sources refer to the subjects from whom information was obtained. When a researcher conducts interviews, the data source is the respondent, who provides written or verbal answers. Qualitative data sources consist of words and actions, supplemented by additional information such as documentation. The data for this study were obtained from:

1. *The Principal*: The principal, as the manager of the institution, is responsible for the smooth running of the educational process and holds the highest decision-making authority in the school.
2. *Teachers*: Teachers act as spiritual guides for students, utilizing all cognitive, psychomotor, and affective potentials.
3. *Students*: The students are participants who are growing and developing both physically and psychologically to achieve their educational goals through the institution.
4. *Documents*: These include documents related to teachers, students, and other relevant records that pertain to the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection is one of the most crucial stages in the research process. The methods used for data collection in this study include:

1. *Interviews*: This technique involves face-to-face interactions where the researcher collects information by asking questions. In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the strategies used by Islamic Education teachers to develop the religious character of students. The interviews were conducted with the principal and teachers at MA AZ-ZAIN to gather insights into their strategies. The interview steps in this research include: 1) Identifying interview subjects; 2) Preparing key issues for discussion; 3) Initiating the interview process; 4) Conducting the interview; 5) Confirming interview results; 6) Recording the interview in field notes; 7) Analyzing subsequent interview results (Seidman, 2019).

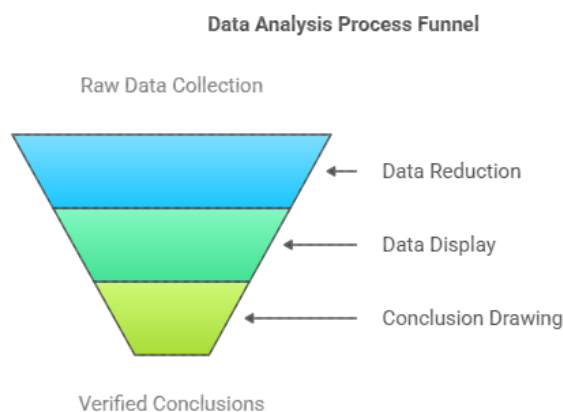


2. *Observations*: Systematic observation was used to gather information related to the research focus. The researcher observed and recorded phenomena at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk, participating directly in the field to collect information systematically.
3. *Documentation*: The documentation method involved collecting information from various sources, such as records, copies, books, newspapers, agendas, and more. This method was used to complement data obtained from interviews and observations. Documents such as photos, school records, interview transcripts, and historical documents were collected for analysis (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis Techniques

This qualitative research presents data in the form of words rather than numbers. Data analysis in this study consists of three stages:

1. *Data Reduction*: Data reduction involves the selection, focusing, simplification, abstraction, and transformation of raw data from field notes. This process continues throughout the research, particularly during discussions and interviews with the principal, teachers, and students (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018).
2. *Data Display*: Data display refers to organizing and presenting structured information that allows for drawing conclusions. This involves arranging complex information systematically for easier understanding and analysis. Displays include matrices, charts, grids, maps, and other forms that help in making data accessible and well-organized for analysis.
3. *Conclusion Drawing and Verification*: The final step involves drawing or verifying conclusions based on the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).



Gambar 1: *Data Analysis Process*



Validity Checks

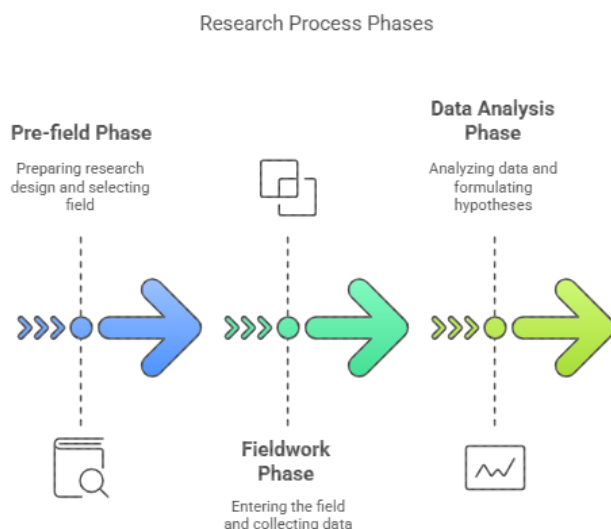
The validity of data is crucial for ensuring that the findings are accurate and applicable. The validity checks in this study aim to ensure the authenticity of the data related to the role of teachers, benefiting both the researcher and the educators. The checks involve:

1. *For Islamic Education Teachers:* a. Identifying and addressing deficiencies in the teaching-learning process. b. Introducing new strategies for developing students' religious character. c. Encouraging teachers to enhance their creativity and innovation in the teaching process.
2. *For Students:* a. Helping students develop better personal and moral qualities through the integration of religious values in education. b. Encouraging students to embody noble character traits (akhlaq al-karimah).

Research Phases

The research follows the phased model proposed by Moleong (2019), which includes:

1. *Pre-field Phase:* Involves preparing the research design, selecting the research field, obtaining permissions, assessing the field, selecting and utilizing informants, preparing research equipment, and addressing ethical issues.
2. *Fieldwork Phase:* Involves understanding the research background, preparing oneself, entering the field, and participating while collecting data.
3. *Data Analysis Phase:* Includes basic data analysis concepts, identifying themes, formulating hypotheses, and analyzing data based on these hypotheses.



Gambar 2: *Research Process Phases*



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Every madrasah (Islamic school) has guidelines that serve as directions in various activities to achieve desired goals. These activities also represent a form of strategy by the Islamic Education (PAI) teachers and the madrasah itself in developing the religious character of students, which has been approved by the head of the madrasah. To gather data regarding the Objective Conditions of Students' Religious Character, interviews were conducted with several PAI teachers, the principal, the vice principal for curriculum, and the students. Below is the presentation of the results from the interviews and observations at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk:

Mr. Agung Mandiro stated: "In general, the religious character of the students at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk is quite good, but there is still room for improvement. The religious culture, such as performing obligatory prayers and Dhuha prayers, is still lacking among some students. Regarding manners, students nowadays are less fearful and more likely to speak out of turn when teachers are speaking. However, the positive side is that students are willing to challenge themselves to improve their religious character. I acknowledge that they are honest, even if they do not always perform prayers and are hesitant to admit their mistakes. Every time I enter the twelfth-grade classroom, I test their Quranic recitation skills, and it turns out that they still need to learn Tajweed. Nevertheless, about 80% of the students can memorize and understand the rules of recitation, but the remaining 20% still need more guidance to keep up with their peers."

Regarding the uniqueness of the religious character at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk, Mr. Mandiro added that since he joined the madrasah, the teachers have collectively encouraged the students to practice reciting prayers before and after learning sessions. In the first period, before lessons begin, they also recite a short Tahlil every day. Upon entering the madrasah premises, students are greeted by the teachers and are required to greet them with Salam (peace greeting) and shake hands with the teachers. They are also required to perform Dhuha prayers in congregation before the school day starts and Dhuhr prayers in congregation later in the day. Additionally, activities such as Friday charity, social service, and celebrating Islamic holidays like Maulid Nabi and Isra' Mi'raj are observed.

Mr. Nasrullah, another PAI teacher, remarked: "The objective condition of the students' religious character at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk is quite good, as many students are willing to participate in religious activities such as Dhuha prayers, Dhuhr prayers in congregation, and reciting prayers before and after learning. The students also have a good habit of greeting their teachers with Salam and shaking hand, which reflects their religious character of humility towards their teachers."

Furthermore, the uniqueness of the students' religious character at MA AZ-ZAIN lies in the madrasah's foundation in pesantren (Islamic boarding school)



traditions. Therefore, students also engage in activities like studying classical Islamic texts (Kitab Kuning). Although many students initially struggle to understand these texts, they gradually learn to comprehend and apply them. The researcher observed that the religious character of the students at MA AZ-ZAIN is quite good, as evidenced by their growing discipline in performing Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers in congregation. Moreover, students are accustomed to respectful behavior, such as shaking hands and greeting teachers.

Ms. Rifa, another PAI teacher, noted: "The students' religious character at MA AZ-ZAIN is generally good, as seen from their behavior and participation in activities such as Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers in congregation, as well as Quranic recitation training. We also conduct character education through greetings, with students shaking hands with teachers, even though some students do not fully engage in this practice. However, the foundation of respect and tolerance is there. When students enter the classroom, we begin with prayers before and after class, and I often encourage them to memorize Asma'ul Husna (The Beautiful Names of Allah) to instill a deeper love for Allah."

As the vice principal for curriculum, Mr. Sholeh commented: "The students' religious character at MA AZ-ZAIN is quite good, supported by adequate facilities for religious activities, such as the prayer room, toilets, and washing facilities. Gradually, students understand the importance and benefits of worship. Moreover, the religious education activities conducted in the mosque, including Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers, allow teachers to easily guide students in worship and communal prayers. The enthusiasm for learning Islamic knowledge is influenced by the madrasah's association with the pesantren."

From these observations, the researcher concludes that the students' religious character at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkok Nganjuk is generally good, supported by the conducive environment and facilities at the madrasah, which also benefit from its proximity to the pesantren. The researcher also noted the positive energy and increased piety among the students, cultivated through regular religious activities such as congregational prayers and Quranic recitation.

Strategies of Islamic Education Teachers in Developing Students' Religious Character

It is well understood that a teacher's role is not limited to teaching alone but extends to various interconnected responsibilities. Regarding the strategies for developing students' religious character, it is crucial in the teaching and learning process. To gather information on the strategies employed by PAI teachers at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkok Nganjuk, interviews were conducted with Mr. Agung Mandiro and Ms. Ana Urifatul M, both PAI teachers at the madrasah.

Mr. Agung Mandiro stated that his strategies for developing students' religious character include:



1. *Setting an Example*: "We, as Muslim teachers, must first be role models and set examples for our students. Our actions will encourage students to develop their religious character. We also want to assess the extent of their knowledge, faith, devotion, and appreciation of Islam."
2. *Guidance and Motivation*: "During religious activities, we guide and motivate students to achieve the madrasah's goals."
3. *Evaluation and Advice*: "After setting examples, we evaluate the students' shortcomings and provide advice to help them improve."

The researcher observed that Mr. Agung Mandiro's strategy involves setting a personal example, guiding students, and providing constructive feedback to foster their religious character.

Ms. Rifa added that her strategies include:

1. *Material Preparation*: "Teachers prepare materials that encourage students to act upon them, such as topics on charity, zakat, and sadaqah (almsgiving). Students are required to practice these skills, such as directly helping the needy in their communities or nearby areas. This helps develop their religious character, as these behaviors can inspire future acts of generosity."
2. *Rewards and Recognition*: "We provide rewards in the form of skill points to students who demonstrate religious behavior. These points are reflected in their report cards as skill grades, fostering a sense of responsibility for their religious values."
3. *Daily Religious Activities*: "MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk implements daily Dhuha prayers in congregation from 06:30 to 07:10 AM and Dhuhr prayers in the mosque, which help build the students' religious character and strengthen their faith."

The researcher observed that Ms. Rifa's strategy involves preparing relevant materials, rewarding students for religious behavior, and ensuring the practice of daily religious activities, which collectively contribute to the development of the students' religious character.

Mr. Nasrullah, another PAI teacher, noted: "We employ different strategies to instill and shape the students' religious character. For instance, the first-year students are guided through daily prayers, and they greet their teachers and peers, which indirectly cultivates their religious personality. Upon entering the madrasah, students are expected to turn off their motorcycles, push them to the parking area, and greet the teachers. This reflects the emphasis on religious manners and respect within the madrasah."



DISCUSSION

Objective Conditions of Students' Religious Character at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk

Religiosity is often understood as a dimension involving faith, practiced in rituals, and generally associated with morality. According to Glock and Stark's dimensions of religiosity, it includes the level of knowledge, strength of faith, diligence in worship, and depth of religious experience (Glock & Stark, 1965). In Islamic teachings, morality (Akhlaq) is essential, where ethical behavior reflects a person's religious commitment (Musthofa, 2019).

There are five dimensions of religiosity according to Glock and Stark: religious belief, religious practice, religious experience, religious knowledge, and religious effects. Through religious habituation activities, it is expected that students will participate in character formation. At MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk, religious activities are not limited to the classroom but also include extracurricular practices such as Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers in congregation, memorization of short surahs, monthly Quranic recitation, and practices of respect, such as shaking hands with teachers and offering greetings.

These habituation activities contribute to the natural development of the students' religious character. Students who lacked proper manners and religious practices before attending the madrasah gradually develop a better understanding of ethics and religious values. The daily religious activities and routines at MA AZ-ZAIN, such as entering the school premises respectfully, greeting teachers, and performing congregational prayers, cultivate positive behavior and deepen the students' religious character.

Based on the data collected, the researcher concludes that the students' religious character at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk is sufficiently developed. Most students actively participate in religious activities, such as Dhuha prayers in the mosque, Dhuhr prayers, and reciting prayers before and after lessons. Additionally, the students demonstrate good religious character by greeting their teachers with Salam and shaking hands.

Strategies of Islamic Education Teachers in Developing Students' Religious Character at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk

Teachers play a crucial role in creating an effective learning process. They employ strategic methods to enhance both in-class and out-of-class learning. As educators, teachers are responsible for guiding, nurturing, and improving the students' religious character. According to Al-Ghazali, a teacher is one who guides and purifies the hearts of students, bringing them closer to Allah (Al-Ghazali, 2017). Meanwhile, Yusuf (2018) emphasizes that teachers must be competent individuals responsible for the well-being and development of their students.



The teachers at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk apply religious activities to develop students' religious character by encouraging participation in congregational prayers, such as Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers. In the classroom, lessons begin with the recitation of Tahlil and prayers, reinforcing the students' religious practices. These activities are integral to shaping the students' religious character, helping them develop good manners, ethical behavior, and a stronger connection with Allah.

Character education is also practiced through greeting rituals, where students shake hands and offer Salam to their teachers, fostering respect and tolerance. The researcher observed that the teachers' strategies, including daily religious activities and rewards for religious behavior, contribute to the students' sense of responsibility for their religious character. Additionally, the support of the madrasah's facilities and infrastructure, such as the mosque and Quranic materials, further reinforces these practices.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the discussion and data analysis regarding the strategies employed by Islamic Education teachers in developing students' religious character, the researcher concludes that the religious character of students at MA AZ-ZAIN Lengkong Nganjuk is generally good. This is reflected in the students' willingness to enhance their religious character, which is demonstrated through their honest behavior and consistent engagement in religious practices within the madrasah environment, such as reciting the Qur'an, participating in Tahlil, and performing prayers. Nevertheless, some challenges persist, particularly in cultivating the habit of consistently performing Sunnah prayers, a difficulty that is largely influenced by the students' external environments. To foster students' religious character, Islamic Education teachers at MA AZ-ZAIN have implemented several strategies, including setting examples of good behavior, providing guidance and direction, formulating practical theories related to religious conduct, and habituating students to religious practices within the madrasah setting. These strategies have been instrumental in strengthening the religious foundation of the students, although continuous efforts are still needed to overcome existing challenges.

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