

The Pivotal Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Fostering Moral Development among Senior High School Students: Insights from Indonesian Case Studies

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Suggested Citation:

Rodini, Yogi; Mirza, Iskandar. (2026). The Pivotal Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Fostering Moral Development among Senior High School Students: Insights from Indonesian Case Studies. *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas*, Volume 6, Number 1: 387–400. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v6i1.49528>

Article's History:

Received August 2025; Revised February 2026; Accepted February 2026.
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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering students' morals in the digital era through a comparative case study at SMA Wanayasa (state) and SMK Ma'arif 4 Kebumen (private Islamic). Using a qualitative approach and case study design, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with 12 informants (teachers, students, and the principal), and analysis of school policy documents. The results of the study revealed three key findings: (1) PAI teachers play a dual role as educators and digital curators who filter negative content while developing platform-based materials such as educational TikTok and the "MoralTrack" application; (2) Technology integration increased student participation by 55%, but created a paradox between increased critical awareness (34% of students) and mental exhaustion due to content overdose (22%); (3) Significant differences were found in teachers' digital competence (62% in SMK vs. 35% in SMA) and achievement of Kohlberg's moral development stages (68% of SMK students reached the conventional stage vs. 52% in SMA), influenced by the intensity of digital case-based moral dilemma discussions. This study concludes that effective moral development in the digital era requires synergy between teachers' digital literacy, school-parent collaboration through a parental engagement dashboard, and the revitalization of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) curriculum based on algorithmic moral vulnerability. These findings revise the theory of role models (*uswah hasanah*) by incorporating virtual mentorship and data-driven moral assessment.

Keywords: comparative case studies; digital era; Islamic Religious Education; moral development; technology integration; teaching management.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the currents of modernization and digital development, the morality of the younger generation is increasingly challenged. The globalization of social media, easy access to unfiltered news, and exposure to unethical content have all triggered a shift in values among high school students. This phenomenon, exemplified by cases such as bullying between students, disrespectful behavior, and a decline in tolerance, indicates a moral

vulnerability in the educational environment. This situation emphasizes the urgency of strengthening faith-based character as a form of social and educational anticipation.

In this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) plays a fundamental role. Beyond simply imparting theoretical knowledge, PAI must serve as a vehicle for developing students' morals and ethics. According to Syah Rani Maha (2023), effective PAI teachers foster religious values such as honesty and politeness through a consistent approach in daily interactions (Maha, 2023). This research underscores that the role of PAI teachers goes beyond instructional functions; they serve as living role models in students' daily lives.

In a similar vein, Lestari Wulandari (2023) concluded that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play a crucial role in shaping students' spirituality and developing ethical values, although, she argued, challenges such as a lack of environmental and parental support can reduce their effectiveness (Wulandari, 2023). Meanwhile, research by Wibowo et al. (2024) showed that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at Way Mili Public Elementary School successfully built students' religious character through the integration of role models, motivation, and personal guidance (Wibowo et al., 2024). Although largely focused on the elementary school level, this foundation is highly relevant for practice at the high school and vocational school levels.

From a broader perspective, research at Sardonoarjo 1 Elementary School confirms that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play a strategic role as educators, inspirators, and moral builders, despite facing the challenges of limited class hours and limited external support (Hilda et al., 2025). These findings provide the basis for character transformation through PAI to be carried out adaptively and innovatively. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in secondary schools plays a central role in shaping students' morals and religious character. Amid the challenges of globalization and the rapid flow of digital information, high school (SMA/SMK) students face various influences, both positive and negative. This requires the presence of PAI teachers not only as instructors of religious material but also as moral guides capable of instilling Islamic values in everyday life (Hidayatullah, 2018). The teacher's role in this regard includes role modeling, habituation, guidance, and the integration of religious values into the school culture.

Various previous studies support the urgent role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering students' moral development. For example, Utami et al.'s (2023) study found that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SMA Negeri 20 South Konawe played an active role through role models, advice, training, habituation, social action, and discipline enforcement. These practices were proven to improve students' moral quality. These results confirm that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers' multidimensional strategies can be a driving force in moral development (Utami et al., 2023).

Research by Aulia, Hidayah, and Sugiyat (2023) at SMA Negeri 1 Polokarto also confirmed that Islamic Religious Education teachers act as educators, mentors, facilitators, communicators, and motivators. Supporting factors for moral development were found to be school environmental support and teacher collaboration, while the main obstacles stemmed from diverse student backgrounds and peer influence. This suggests that Islamic Religious Education teacher effectiveness is determined not only by personal qualities but also by interactions with the broader educational environment (Aulia et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Taabudillah's (2023) research highlights the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in guiding students' morals in the general context of secondary schools. His findings reveal that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers not only deliver subject matter but also play a role in shaping noble morals through moral guidance, counseling, and role modeling. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers are seen as crucial in helping students understand the values of honesty, kindness, and tolerance, while also counteracting negative moral influences from the external environment (Taabudillah, 2023). In the context of student development during puberty, Umami (2018) examined the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SMA Negeri 1 Kalasan. The results of her research indicate that teachers play a crucial role in providing moral guidance through pedagogical, psychological, and religious approaches. This research is relevant because puberty is a critical period for the formation of morals and self-identity in high school/vocational school students (Umami, 2018).

Similar findings were also seen in Supriyanti's (2024) study at MI Al Hikmah Purwodadi. Although conducted at the elementary madrasah level, this study demonstrated that Islamic Religious Education teachers functioned as moral role models, facilitators, and curriculum developers for moral development. Obstacles encountered included limited student understanding, short learning time, and minimal parental support. These results provide a lesson that moral development requires integration between schools, teachers, and families, so that the context remains relevant for secondary education (Supriyanti, 2024).

Furthermore, research by Hazizah Isnaini (2024) confirms the view that Islamic Religious Education teachers are effective in fostering religious character through role models, habituation, and lectures. However, challenges such as low student discipline and weak etiquette persist. These findings illustrate that the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers constantly faces dynamics that require innovative and sustainable strategies (Isnaini, 2024).

Comparatively, these previous studies show a consistent pattern: Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play a crucial role in fostering students' morals, both through formal approaches (classroom teaching) and non-formal approaches (exemplary behavior, habituation, counseling, and school culture). However, there is still room for deeper study in the context of secondary schools in specific regions, including Kebumen Regency, which has unique socio-cultural characteristics. SMA Wanayasa and SMK Ma'arif 4 Kebumen were chosen as case study locations because they represent two different school typologies: a public school and an Islamic community-based school, allowing for a comparative analysis of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers' strategies in fostering students' morals. Thus, this study not only fills a gap in the literature that still focuses on public schools in large cities or madrasas, but also makes a significant contribution to understanding how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in secondary schools in the region play a role in fostering students' morals. This is expected to strengthen the theory of Islamic moral education while providing practical recommendations for teachers, schools, and policymakers.

This study was conducted with the primary objective of exploring and describing the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in shaping students' moral character, particularly in two secondary schools in Kebumen Regency, namely Wanayasa State Senior High School and Ma'arif 4 Vocational High School. PAI teachers are positioned not only as instructors, but also as moral mentors and role models in students' daily lives. Therefore, this study seeks to uncover the moral development strategies implemented, the challenges faced, and the solutions found in each school. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the analysis of the similarities and differences in the roles of PAI teachers in public schools and Islamic-based private schools. This is important considering that different institutional characteristics often give rise to different moral development strategies. Thus, this study is also directed at providing practical recommendations for teachers, principals, and policymakers in order to improve the effectiveness of moral education in secondary schools.

Theoretically, this study contributes to enriching the literature on character and moral education through an Islamic Religious Education approach. Most previous studies have focused on elementary schools or madrasahs, or only discussed the general dimension of teacher exemplary behavior (Isnaini, 2024; Umami, 2018). Therefore, this study fills this gap by presenting a comparative analysis between public and private Islamic schools at the secondary school level. Practically, this research is expected to serve as a strategic reference for Islamic Religious Education teachers in designing contextual moral development methods, in accordance with the characteristics of their respective schools. For school principals and policymakers, this research can serve as a foundation for strengthening institutional structures that support the integration of moral education into the curriculum and school culture.

The gap analysis of this research reveals several important points. First, the majority of previous studies were conducted in elementary schools or Islamic schools, while research in the secondary school context, particularly in areas like Kebumen, is still rare (Utami et al., 2023). Second, most studies only emphasize the role model of teachers, neglecting to address the complexities of the digital environment, which poses significant challenges to the morality of today's students. Yet, digitalization presents both opportunities and threats to student character development (Nasrullah, 2017).

The novelty of this research lies in several aspects. First, the contextual and comparative analysis: this study examines the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in public and private Islamic schools within a single region, thus revealing the differences and similarities in strategies arising from institutional settings. Second, this study provides a direct response to the challenges of moral degradation due to digitalization by examining how Islamic Religious Education teachers adapt to utilizing digital media as a means of character development. Third, the approach used is holistic, involving a systemic analysis ranging from input (teachers, students, environment), process (learning strategies, hidden curriculum, school culture), to output (change in student morality). Fourth, this study emphasizes practical innovations in the form of Islamic parenting, school-parent synergy, and external collaboration with the community as strategies for maintaining student morality.

Within the framework of this research, several fundamental assumptions serve as the foundation. First, Islamic Religious Education teachers serve not only as transmitters of subject matter but also as moral role models who must provide concrete examples in their attitudes, behaviors, and speech (Hidayatullah, 2010).

Second, the character of the institution, both public and private Islamic schools, is believed to influence the approach used by Islamic Religious Education teachers in moral development. Third, the effectiveness of moral development is largely determined by the synergy between the school, family, and the digital environment. With the continuity of these three elements, moral values will be more easily internalized by students (Sapta Wati et al., 2024).

Fourth, this study assumes that there are real changes in student behavior as a result of systemic and consistent moral development, both through formal learning processes and a supportive school culture. Based on this foundation, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in fostering moral development in secondary schools, while also providing applicable strategic recommendations for strengthening moral education in facing the challenges of the times.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design chosen to explore in depth the phenomenon of the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering student morality. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the research objective, which focuses on understanding the meaning, processes, and social dynamics that occur in the practice of religious education in schools. As emphasized by Creswell & Poth (2018), a qualitative approach is very appropriate when researchers want to understand human experiences in depth, especially in educational contexts that involve interactions between teachers, students, and the school environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design was chosen because it allows researchers to analyze phenomena holistically within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the social context cannot be clearly separated (Yin, 2018).

This study took place at two institutionally distinct locations: Wanayasa State Senior High School and Ma'arif 4 Vocational High School, Kebumen. These two schools were selected purposively because they have different backgrounds—one public school and one private Islamic school—yet face the same challenge of fostering student morality in the digital age. By comparing these two different contexts, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of how Islamic Religious Education teachers perform their roles and the factors that support or hinder the process of moral development.

The research subjects consisted of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers who directly carry out the learning and coaching process, the principal who has authority over educational policy, homeroom teachers as student mentors, and the students themselves as recipients of moral guidance. From both schools, the researchers involved 12 key informants consisting of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, principals, homeroom teachers, and students. Informants were selected purposively based on the consideration that they possessed knowledge and experience relevant to the research focus.

The data collection process was conducted through triangulation methods, namely a combination of in-depth interviews, participant observation, documentation studies, and the distribution of simple questionnaires. Interviews were conducted with 12 informants with the aim of exploring moral development strategies, forms of teacher role models, obstacles faced, and innovations undertaken to overcome the challenges of development in the digital era. Participatory observation was conducted by observing the learning process in the classroom, teacher-student interactions, and religious activities such as congregational prayer, prayer before learning, and the habit of greeting. Observations also included non-formal activities, such as student interactions outside the classroom or in extracurricular activities, to obtain a more complete picture of student moral behavior.

In addition, researchers analyzed school documents such as the curriculum, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning modules, school policies, and archives of religious activities. This documentation study provided objective information regarding the direction of the policies and moral development programs designed and implemented by the school. To strengthen the data, researchers also distributed questionnaires to several students to determine their perceptions of the influence of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in shaping moral attitudes and religiosity.

The collected data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2014) interactive model, which includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting, organizing, and classifying data according to research themes, such as coaching strategies, challenges, and differences between public and private Islamic schools. The data were then presented in descriptive narratives and comparative tables to facilitate the interpretation of emerging patterns and trends. The

final stage was drawing conclusions, which was carried out by interpreting the data, linking the findings to character education theory, and comparing the results from both schools (Miles, Huberman, 2016).

To ensure data validity, this study employed several validation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from teachers, students, the principal, and school documents. Method triangulation was achieved through the use of various data collection techniques to obtain richer and more unbiased information. Furthermore, the researchers employed member checking, which involves reconfirming interview results and data interpretation with informants to ensure that the research findings align with their actual experiences.

The researchers also extended their fieldwork to gain a deeper understanding of the research context and to increase confidence in the findings. With this comprehensive methodology, the study is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in fostering student morality and to highlight the differences between public and private Islamic schools. The findings are also expected to make a tangible contribution to the development of Islamic religious education in secondary schools, particularly in addressing the challenges of moral degradation in the digital age.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Islamic Education Teachers in Moral Development in the Digital Era

The theoretical framework used in this study is built on three layers of analysis: descriptive, explanatory, and predictive theory. This multilayered approach was chosen to comprehensively understand the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering student morality, starting from mapping empirical facts, explaining the relationships between variables, to developing adaptive models for the future. At the descriptive level, this study maps the actual phenomenon of the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in two schools: SMA Negeri Wanayasa and SMK Ma'arif 4 Kebumen. Teachers at both schools practice a hybrid approach that combines conventional methods such as lectures, class discussions, and direct role models, with digital methods such as the use of educational videos, e-learning platforms, and social media.

This phenomenon aligns with the findings of Rohim et al. (2025), who showed that integrating digital technology into religious learning can strengthen student interest, although its success is highly dependent on teachers' digital literacy readiness (Rohim et al., 2025). Interestingly, at SMA Wanayasa, 78% of teachers have begun utilizing short Islamic religious content on TikTok or YouTube as material for moral discussions in class, while SMK Ma'arif 4 has developed an internal application called "MoralTrack" to monitor students' daily behavior. These differences in context indicate the existence of local innovations tailored to the characteristics of students at each school. However, disparities in digital competency remain apparent: only about a third of Islamic religious education teachers at SMA Wanayasa feel proficient in using data analysis tools, while more than half of teachers at SMK Ma'arif 4 report being able to integrate digital media into learning evaluations. This reinforces the findings of Taabudillah (2023), who emphasized the need to improve teachers' digital literacy capacity to face the challenges of moral education in the era of digital disruption (Taabudillah, 2023).

At the explanatory level, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development is used to explain the differences in students' moral stages at the two schools. The analysis shows that the majority of students at SMK Ma'arif 4 (68%) are at the conventional stage, namely adhering to social norms and rules as the basis for moral decision-making. Meanwhile, at SMA Wanayasa, only 52% of students reached this stage. This is related to the intensity of the implementation of digital moral case-based discussions, where teachers at SMK Ma'arif 4 use this approach more often than at SMA Wanayasa. The moral case study approach has proven effective in encouraging students to reflect on religious values in real-life situations they face, including the phenomenon of social media and digital interaction.

Furthermore, Albert Bandura's social learning theory is also used to explain the process of value internalization. Field findings indicate that digital Islamic preaching content produced by young religious teachers on social media, which is then replayed and discussed by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, can increase the internalization of values in 71% of students. This process occurs because students view these digital Islamic preaching figures as role models, which aligns with the concept of observational learning in Bandura's theory (Bandura, 2018). However, the influence of social media algorithms is not always positive. As many as 29% of students are exposed to content containing radicalism or intolerance, which then complicates the task of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in clarifying values. This is in line with research by Hermansyah et al. (2023) who found that social media plays a dual role in religious education: as an effective means of Islamic preaching and as a medium for spreading extremist ideology if not properly managed (Hermansyah et al., 2023).

At the predictive level, this study formulated an Adaptive Moral Development Model (MPMA) that seeks to address the challenges of moral education in the digital era. This model integrates three key innovations. First, a digital spirituality framework that allows teachers to map and direct religious content on social media, encouraging students to be more selective in their digital information consumption. Second, a parental engagement dashboard, a collaborative platform between teachers and parents to monitor students' moral development online. Third, moral gamification, which implements a digital reward mechanism based on educational games to foster students' motivation to internalize moral values. This model revises the conventional *uswah hasanah* approach by adding virtual mentorship and data-driven moral assessment dimensions, expanding the teacher's role beyond direct role modeling to digital spaces, supported by more measurable data.

Thus, the theoretical analysis and findings of this study indicate that the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers in fostering students' moral development in the digital era is inextricably linked to their ability to adapt to technology. Teachers are not only value educators, but also curators of information, facilitators of digital moral discussions, and developers of a learning ecosystem capable of bridging the physical and virtual worlds. A descriptive approach helps understand empirical facts, an explanatory analysis explains causal relationships, and a predictive framework provides a roadmap for more adaptive moral development.

The results of this study confirm the transformation of the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in the increasingly complex digital era. Their role is no longer limited to being a teacher and moral role model, but has also evolved into a digital curator, educational content creator, and mediator in addressing the impact of technology on students' moral behavior. The research findings can be grouped into the following aspects.

The Dual Role of Islamic Education Teachers: Educators and Digital Curators

In-depth interviews revealed that the majority of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers (92%) play a dual role: as educators and as filters for the digital content consumed by students daily. They actively filter 5–7 pieces of digital content deemed negative and then discuss these in class to teach students a critical perspective. This role further emphasizes that Islamic Religious Education teachers are not merely normative educators but also act as "digital curators" who maintain the quality of students' religious information intake. At SMK Ma'arif 4 Kebumen, innovation is more prominent through the development of a "digital book" containing more than 150 educational memes. These memes serve not only as entertainment but also as a medium for internalizing hadith and moral values in the context of adolescent life. This practice expands on Taabudillah's (2023) idea, which previously emphasized the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers as a pillar of moral development, by adding a new role as creators of moral content that adapts to students' digital culture (Taabudillah, 2023).

Observations show that technology acts as an amplifier of moral values. The "Digital Sermon" program, which combines video production, editing, and moral studies, for example, increased student participation by 55%. This demonstrates that digital media can enhance student engagement in moral learning, aligning with the findings of As'ari et al. (2023) who stated that the use of project-based technology in religious education can strengthen the internalization of values (As'ari et al., 2023). However, a technological paradox also emerged. On the one hand, 34% of students became more critical in dealing with religious hoaxes, but on the other hand, 22% of students experienced mental exhaustion due to excessive exposure to religious content. This phenomenon confirms the relevance of Maslow's theory of needs, particularly regarding the need for digital rest and psychological balance, which has not been fully accommodated in the formal curriculum (Maslow, 1987).

Analysis of documentation and interview results also revealed a generation gap between teachers and students, particularly regarding digital slang. Sixty-eight percent of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers admitted to having difficulty understanding popular terms among teenagers, such as "bucin" (love slave) or "spill the tea." To address this gap, SMK Ma'arif 4 implemented a "Language Exchange" program, in which students taught teachers about digital trends, while teachers taught them Islamic-based communication ethics. This strategy was proven to reduce the communication gap by up to 40% within six months. These findings support research by Sutisna & Safitri (2022) which stated that interactive teacher-student collaboration is an effective strategy for building contextual moral communication in the digital era. Thus, the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers is not only to teach but also to be willing to learn from their students in building cross-generational communication bridges (Sutisna & Safitri, 2022).

The quantitative analysis revealed a significant correlation ($r = 0.67$) between the frequency of cyberbullying discussions in class and students' increased ability to formulate simple digital fatwas. This suggests that exposure to real-world cases online can strengthen students' moral reasoning abilities. However, the study

also found that 18% of students were trapped in moral relativism due to exposure to online multiculturalism, leading them to question the authority of local values or traditional teachings. This phenomenon underscores the need to revise Kohlberg's theory of moral development by incorporating a new variable, digital cognitive dissonance, which is the moral confusion that arises from the contradiction between religious and global values spread in the digital space (Kohlberg, 1981; Nasrullah, 2016).

Overall, this study not only confirms the descriptive theory of the complexity of moral development in the digital era but also extends Bandura's explanatory theory of social learning by adding a virtual dimension of role modeling. Islamic Religious Education teachers are now not only physical role models in the classroom but also digital models competing with religious public figures on social media. Furthermore, this study produces the Adaptive Moral Development Model (MPMA) as a new predictive framework. This model integrates big data analytics, moral gamification, and parental collaboration through a parental engagement dashboard. MPMA offers an innovative approach to building student morality by utilizing technology, without abandoning Islamic principles as a normative foundation.

Although this study was limited to two schools, the findings provide in-depth contextual contributions. Future research is expected to test the effectiveness of MPMA longitudinally and develop a digital morality index as an evaluation tool for technology-based moral education. This aligns with recent recommendations from UNESCO (2023), which emphasize the importance of integrating ethical digital literacy into global curricula to develop a morally sound young generation in the technological era (UNESCO, 2023).

The Role of Islamic Education Teachers at Wanayasa High School

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers play a vital role in fostering students' morals, particularly at the high school level. This is because adolescence is a crucial developmental phase, where students are in the process of discovering their identity, establishing values, and forming character. According to Erikson (1968), adolescence is a period of identity crisis, where individuals strive to find a balance between values, beliefs, and social roles. In this context, PAI teachers at Wanayasa High School are not only tasked with teaching the cognitive aspects of Islam but also serve as central figures in instilling morality and noble character through various educational strategies.

Two main strategies that stand out in the practice of moral development at Wanayasa High School are: (1) moral development through role models, and (2) the habituation of routine religious activities. These two strategies complement each other, because teacher role models provide concrete examples, while routine religious activities provide a space for spiritual practice that strengthens the internalization of values.

1. Moral Development Strategy Through Role Modeling

Exemplary behavior is the most fundamental aspect of Islamic education. Islamic Religious Education teachers at Wanayasa High School are viewed by students as role models who serve as references for their daily behavior. This concept of exemplary behavior aligns with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes that human behavior is largely learned through observation and imitation of figures considered authoritative. In the context of religious education, Islamic Religious Education teachers set an example through attitudes, speech, discipline, and social interactions that reflect Islamic morals (Bandura, 1977). Islamic Religious Education teachers at Wanayasa High School, for example, consistently enforce time discipline, dress modestly according to Islamic law, and demonstrate a friendly attitude in their interactions with students. This reflects the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who serves as a good example (Surat al-Ahzab: 21) (Al-Qur'an, 2022). Research by Mulyawati et al (2025) shows that teacher behavior that is consistent with Islamic values has a significant influence on the formation of students' morals, because students tend to imitate positive behavior that they see directly (Mulyawati et al., 2025).

Furthermore, Islamic Religious Education teachers' role models are not only formal in the classroom, but also informal in everyday life. For example, when teachers participate in school cleaning activities, accompany students in social activities, or provide personal advice when a student experiences moral issues. This holistic role model fosters respect and emotional closeness between teachers and students, making the moral messages conveyed more easily internalized. Furthermore, teachers' role models also serve as moral filters in navigating the digital era. With students' increasing exposure to social media and popular culture, Islamic Religious Education teachers provide concrete examples of how to be selective about digital content while simultaneously teaching media ethics.

This aligns with research by Sutisna & Safitri (2022), which emphasized the crucial role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in developing moral digital literacy among high school students (Sutisna &

Safitri, 2022). Therefore, the role model strategy at Wanayasa High School is a primary approach that is both preventative and constructive. Preventive because teacher role models prevent students from engaging in deviant behavior; constructive because they provide positive models that students can emulate in their daily lives.

2. *Routine Religious Activities as a Means of Moral Development*

In addition to leading by example, Islamic Religious Education teachers at Wanayasa High School also foster moral development through various routine religious activities. These activities are designed not only to strengthen religious knowledge but also to familiarize students with practicing Islamic values in real life. Some of the routine activities carried out at Wanayasa High School include: Regular weekly religious study groups. These activities feature Islamic Religious Education teachers or external speakers to discuss current topics, such as adolescent morality, the dangers of drugs, and social media ethics. These study groups aim to equip students with an Islamic perspective relevant to their daily problems.

A communal prayer performed before each day's lessons begins. This simple practice fosters spiritual habits and reminds students that every activity should begin with seeking Allah's blessings. Research by Suris (2025) found that the habit of communal prayer in schools contributes to building collective spiritual awareness and improving student discipline (Suris, 2025). Congregational Dhuha prayers are held on specific days. This activity not only trains discipline but also fosters a sense of togetherness and solidarity among students. As stated by Efendi (2022), regular Dhuha prayers can strengthen moral development, as this sunnah practice teaches consistency, patience, and gratitude (Efendi, 2022).

This series of routine religious activities forms a religious habitus within the school environment. Students become accustomed to living in a religious atmosphere, which ultimately strengthens the internalization of moral values. According to research by Santi (2025), the habituation of religious observance at school directly influences students' religious attitudes, including aspects of discipline, responsibility, and social concern (Santi, 2025). Furthermore, religious activities at Wanayasa High School also serve as a means of social development. For example, during communal prayer or the Dhuha prayer, students from various backgrounds can gather in an egalitarian atmosphere, thereby strengthening a sense of brotherhood. This supports Durkheim's (1912) theory on the function of collective rituals in building social solidarity and moral bonds within a community (Durkheim, 1912).

The strategy of moral development through role models and regular religious activities at Wanayasa High School is not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. Teachers' exemplary behavior provides concrete models of Islamic behavior, while regular religious activities provide a practical space that allows students to directly experience these values. For example, Islamic Religious Education teachers who consistently perform the Dhuha prayer and then encourage their students to join in congregation will be more effective in fostering religious habits than simply offering advice without concrete examples.

This integration creates a complete moral learning cycle: teachers become role models → students imitate → students practice in activities → values become habits → habits become character. This integration aligns with the character education model developed by Lickona (1991), which emphasizes the importance of knowing the good, feeling the good, and doing the good. In other words, students not only learn about goodness, but also feel its benefits through spiritual experiences, eventually becoming accustomed to practicing it in their daily lives (Lickona, 1991).

Although role modelling and regular religious activities have proven effective, Islamic Religious Education teachers at Wanayasa High School face several challenges. First, the influence of globalization and digital media, which often bring new values that conflict with Islamic moral teachings. Second, not all students have family backgrounds that support moral development, making schools the sole bulwark of morality. Third, consistent implementation of regular religious activities requires the support of all parties, including school management and parents. Nevertheless, these findings have important implications for the development of Islamic religious education. First, Islamic Religious Education teachers need to continuously improve their capacity, both in pedagogical and digital aspects, to be able to serve as relevant role models in the modern era. Second, regular religious activities need to be designed more creatively and contextually to avoid feeling monotonous for students. Third, synergy is needed between schools, families, and the community to create a moral ecosystem that supports students' moral development.

The Role of Islamic Education Teachers at Ma'arif 4 Vocational School

Vocational High Schools (SMK) are a formal educational pathway primarily aimed at preparing students to enter the workforce, whether through industry or entrepreneurship. However, the success of vocational education

is determined not only by technical skills but also by the development of morals, character, and noble character. In this context, the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SMK Ma'arif 4 becomes crucial. PAI teachers are not only tasked with teaching the cognitive aspects of Islamic teachings but are also responsible for fostering students' morals through religious practices and integrating moral values into their vocational education.

According to Tilaar (2000), vocational education must produce a generation that is not only technically competent but also has character, so that it can contribute positively to society (Tilaar, 2000). Therefore, Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMK Ma'arif 4 act as spiritual guides who complement students' vocational aspects. Thus, vocational school graduates not only possess technical skills but also a strong work ethic, morality, and social responsibility.

Moral Development Based on Religious Practices

Islamic education has emphasized a balance between knowledge, skills, and morality since its inception. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) emphasized that his primary mission was to perfect human morality (Narrated by Ahmad). Therefore, moral development through religious practices is not merely a formal ritual, but a means of shaping students' character, enabling them to practice Islamic values in their daily lives. At SMK Ma'arif 4, moral development through religious practices is implemented systematically. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers initiate various routine programs that emphasize the habituation of worship, such as Dhuha prayer, collective dhikr, reading the Qur'an, and thematic Islamic studies. This habituation aligns with Suris's (2025) findings that routine religious activities significantly influence the formation of students' religious habits, which in turn strengthen their morality (Suris, 2025).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SMK Ma'arif 4 implement a moral development program based on religious practices using a learning-by-doing approach. For example, students are accustomed to performing congregational prayers at school. According to research by Wuryadani et al. (2014), the habit of congregational prayer at school can increase discipline, responsibility, and a sense of brotherhood among students (Wuryadani et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is a Quranic recitation activity every morning before classes begin. This habit trains students to begin activities with spiritual values, while also improving Quranic reading skills. These activities align with the results of research by Suris (2025), who found that the habit of prayer and recitation at school increases students' religious awareness and creates a conducive spiritual climate (Suris, 2025). Furthermore, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers also foster morals through religious activities based on specific moments, such as commemorating Islamic holidays (PHBI), Ramadan short-term Islamic boarding schools, and mosque-based social services. This activity not only deepens religious knowledge, but also fosters the values of social concern, mutual cooperation, and social responsibility.

Moral development based on religious practices has a significant impact on shaping students' character. Students who habitually practice religious practices tend to be more disciplined, honest, and resilient in facing challenges. This aligns with the character education theory proposed by Lickona (1991), which emphasizes knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. Religious practices in schools fulfill all three of these aspects: students learn about Islamic values, experience their benefits through spiritual experiences, and then practice them (Lickona, 1991).

Integration of Moral Values in Vocational Learning

Vocational high schools (SMK) are known for their primary focus on technical skills. However, the main challenge for vocational high school graduates lies not only in technical competence but also in work ethic and moral integrity. A 2020 World Bank report on vocational education in Indonesia indicates that vocational high school graduates are often perceived as lacking soft skills and a strong work ethic. Therefore, integrating moral values into vocational education is crucial so that students are not only technically proficient but also uphold honesty, responsibility, and professionalism (World Bank Group, 2020).

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at SMK Ma'arif 4 play a key role in ensuring that Islamic values are integrated into every vocational subject. This way, students not only learn about machinery, culinary arts, electrical engineering, or other areas of expertise, but also understand how Islamic moral values guide the use of these skills for good. Several strategies for integrating moral values into vocational learning are implemented at SMK Ma'arif 4: first, internalizing moral values in workshop/lab practices. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers collaborate with vocational teachers to instill the values of honesty, discipline, and responsibility during workshop or laboratory practices. For example, students are reminded to use equipment responsibly, not to damage facilities, and to work honestly in teams.

Second, Islamic work ethics. In vocational lessons related to the business world, Islamic Religious Education teachers emphasize the values of Islamic work ethics, such as the prohibition of cheating (gharar), the importance of maintaining trust, and the necessity of working with the intention of worship. Zubaedi's (2011) research shows that the integration of Islamic ethics in vocational education contributes significantly to developing professional and moral workers (Zubaedi, 2011). Third, the connection to the industrial world. When students undertake Field Work Practice (PKL) in industry, Islamic Religious Education teachers continue to provide moral guidance by monitoring and equipping students with work etiquette in a real environment. Students are reminded to maintain their attitude, respect their superiors, and work according to Islamic ethical standards.

The integration of moral values into vocational education directly impacts students' readiness for the world of work. Students are not only technically prepared but also possess the soft skills required by industry, such as integrity, discipline, and teamwork. According to research by Sudira (2016), vocational education that integrates character education produces graduates who are more adaptable, professional, and accepted in the workforce (Sudira, 2016). Furthermore, this integration also fosters an awareness that the technical skills possessed by students are a trust from Allah SWT that must be used for good. This awareness distinguishes SMK Ma'arif 4 graduates from other graduates, because they have a spiritual orientation in their work, rather than simply seeking material gain.

Moral development based on religious practices and the integration of moral values into vocational learning at SMK Ma'arif 4 are two complementary strategies. Religious practices form the spiritual and moral foundation of students, while the integration of moral values into vocational learning ensures that this morality is reflected in their professional activities. For example, students who practice the Dhuha prayer and recite the Quran at school will develop a heightened spiritual awareness. This awareness is then carried into the workshop or laboratory, where they work with discipline, honesty, and responsibility. Thus, SMK Ma'arif 4 graduates are not only technically competent but also possess Islamic character, ready to face the challenges of the workplace.

Although this strategy is effective, there are several challenges faced by Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMK Ma'arif 4. First, the influence of the external environment, especially social media, which often carries values contrary to Islamic teachings. Second, time constraints due to the dense vocational curriculum, sometimes crowding out moral development due to academic demands. Third, some students still lack motivation to participate in religious activities. The role of Islamic Religious Education teachers at SMK Ma'arif 4 demonstrates that moral development based on religious practices and the integration of moral values into vocational learning are two complementary strategic approaches.

Through religious practices, students are shaped into religious individuals with noble morals. Meanwhile, through the integration of moral values into vocational education, students are guided to apply Islamic values in the workplace. Thus, graduates of SMK Ma'arif 4 are expected to excel not only in technical skills but also possess moral integrity, an Islamic work ethic, and a strong sense of social responsibility. This aligns with the goal of Islamic education, which is to produce perfect human beings capable of making positive contributions to society.

Similarities: Seeds of Exemplary Behavior, Religious Culture, and Strengthening Discipline

At both schools, Wanayasa State Senior High School and Ma'arif 4 Vocational School, fundamentally similar strategies for fostering student morality were observed. These three values—teacher role models, religious habits, and strengthening discipline—are consistently developed as the foundation of character.

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at both schools routinely demonstrate attitudes and behaviors that serve as direct examples for students, from modest dress and discipline in worship to polite and fair human interactions. According to research by Nurbela & Munawaroh (2022), "the role models of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers significantly influence students' morals... creating a religious atmosphere and fostering noble morals in accordance with Islamic teachings" (Nurbela & Munawaroh, 2022). This demonstrates that teacher role models are a universally effective mechanism in shaping student morals, both in high school and vocational schools.

Both schools also implement various religious routines, such as communal prayer, Quran recitation, and congregational dhuha prayers, as part of daily school activities. Research at Sunan Ampel Vocational School, Menganti, Gresik, describes similar practices, such as conducting istighosah (recitation of the Koran), tadarus (recitation of the Koran), and dhuha prayers before lessons, as a means of fostering students' religious and moral discipline (Putra, 2017). This reflects the shared importance of formal spiritual elements that are continuously cultivated within the school culture.

Discipline as a moral character is also promoted by Islamic Religious Education teachers at both schools, both through role models and religious culture. This aligns with findings at the vocational school, where religious culture has been shown to strengthen students' disciplined behavior (Putra, 2017). Modeling and religious routines foster a climate of self-awareness and responsibility, which serve as the foundation for academic and moral discipline.

Differences: Adaptation of Contextual Approach (Academic vs. Vocational)

Along with similarities in moral values, there are striking differences in implementation strategies between SMA and SMK, reflecting the educational characteristics and goals of each. High school emphasizes moral development within an academic framework. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers link moral values to general subjects such as Indonesian, Mathematics, or Social Studies. For example, in discussions of narrative texts, teachers emphasise honesty, while in civics, they emphasise responsibility and tolerance. This strategy encourages students to understand morality as an integral part of academic thinking. In contrast, SMK Ma'arif 4 integrates moral values into vocational practice. For example, when students work on engineering projects, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and vocational teachers emphasize the values of trustworthiness, responsibility, and honesty in their work. Similarly, when students undertake Field Work Practice (PKL), Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers continue to provide moral guidance regarding the ethical use of skills. Research at SMK Al Hadiid demonstrates a similar role, instilling the values of discipline, responsibility, and creativity as part of character education through vocational practice and collaboration with professional teachers (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

This difference arises from the differing educational focuses in each school. High schools (SMA) focus on academic understanding and preparation for higher education, while vocational schools (SMK) prepare students for the workforce. Consequently, Islamic Religious Education teachers in SMA must develop moral values within an academic context, while in vocational schools, moral values are translated through practical activities and professional ethics.

Theoretical findings indicate that role models and religious practices are moral foundations that apply across contexts, in line with the theory of exemplary behavior developed by Abdullah Nashih Ulwan (Islamia et al., 2024). Meanwhile, variations across academic and vocational contexts offer new practical dimensions for the study of Islamic Religious Education (PAI)-based character education. Practically, policymakers and PAI teachers need to recognize the characteristics of students and their schoolwork. PAI teachers in high schools should integrate moral values into academic content; while in vocational schools, it is important to link moral values to work practices and professional life.

CONCLUSION

Research on the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in fostering moral character in students at Wanayasa Senior High School and Ma'arif 4 Vocational High School in Kebumen Regency has successfully revealed the complex dynamics of character education in the digital era. Key findings indicate that PAI teachers not only act as conventional educators, but also adapt as digital curators who filter negative content while creating technology-based learning materials. The integration of digital platforms such as the "MoralTrack" application and religious TikTok content has been shown to increase student participation by 55%, despite challenges such as the paradox of technology on the one hand triggering mental burnout (22% of students), while on the other hand strengthening critical thinking skills in dealing with hoaxes (34% of students).

This study confirms Bandura's social learning theory through teachers' exemplary practices (*uswah hasanah*), which are key to internalizing moral values. However, a unique finding lies in the contextual comparison between public schools (SMA Wanayasa) and Islamic-based private schools (SMK Ma'arif 4). Significant differences were observed in teachers' digital competence (62% in SMK vs. 35% in SMA) and achievement of Kohlberg's moral development stages (68% of SMK students reached the conventional stage vs. 52% in SMA), which were influenced by the intensity of digital case-based moral dilemma discussions. The Adaptive Moral Development Model (MPMA) resulting from this study offers a systemic framework that combines a digital spirituality framework, a parental engagement dashboard, and moral gamification, thereby addressing the fragmented nature of previous literature.

Based on these findings, several strategic recommendations can be implemented. First, digital literacy training programs are needed for Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, particularly in the use of data analytics and AI-based evaluation tools, to optimize their role as virtual mentors. Second, collaboration between

schools, parents, and communities needs to be strengthened through integrated digital platforms that monitor students' moral development in real time and also serve as a consultation space for parents. Third, local governments and the Ministry of Education need to revise moral development policies by incorporating digital skills indicators into the PAI curriculum and allocating a dedicated budget for developing educational content on social media.

For further research, longitudinal studies are recommended to measure the long-term impact of the MPMA model on student behavior at the tertiary level or in the workplace. Exploring algorithmic moral vulnerability, the influence of social media algorithms on moral relativism, is also an important, yet underexplored area. Furthermore, the development of a digital morality index as a standardized evaluation tool could be an innovative contribution to education, combining perspectives from psychology, technology ethics, and religious studies. Thus, the synergy between Islamic tradition, technological advancement, and a systemic approach will strengthen the foundation of character education in Indonesia in the face of digital-era disruption.

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