

Analysis of School Culture in the Development of Religious Character

Nia Atikah Rahma¹, Enny Nazrah Pulungan²

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia^{1,2},

nia0301192110@uinsu.ac.id¹, ennynazrah@uinsu.ac.id²

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Abstract

Keywords:

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Character Development,
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This study aims to describe the implementation of school culture in the development of religious character, identify the factors influencing its execution, and analyze the challenges faced in developing religious character at SMP Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut. The study employs a qualitative approach and is descriptive in nature. The research subjects consist of the school principal, the Islamic Religious Education teacher, and other parties involved in the implementation of the school culture. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, and subsequently analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, which encompasses data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation. The research findings indicate that the school culture at SMP Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut is implemented through the habitual practice of acts of worship such as reciting prayers, Quran memorization (tahfiz), and performing Dhuha and Zuhur prayers in congregation as well as the application of the 5S culture (Smile, Greet, Say Hello, Be Polite, and Be Courteous), the enforcement of discipline focused on guidance, the integration of Islamic values into the learning process, and the creation of a religious school environment. The challenges faced include the lack of optimal awareness and consistency among some students in practicing religious values, the influence of peer environments and digital media, and varying backgrounds regarding religious upbringing within the family. Thus, school culture proves to be a crucial factor in developing students' religious character through the processes of habituation, role modeling, and the continuous internalization of Islamic values.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:

Budaya Sekolah;
Pengembangan Karakter,
Nilai Religius..

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan implementasi budaya sekolah dalam pengembangan karakter religius, mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi pelaksanaannya, serta menganalisis tantangan yang dihadapi dalam pengembangan karakter religius di SMP Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis penelitian deskriptif. Subjek penelitian terdiri atas kepala sekolah, guru Pendidikan Agama Islam, dan pihak-pihak yang terlibat dalam pelaksanaan budaya sekolah. Data dikumpulkan melalui teknik observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña yang meliputi kondensasi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan kesimpulan dan verifikasi. Keabsahan data dilakukan melalui triangulasi sumber dan triangulasi teknik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa budaya sekolah di SMP Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut diimplementasikan melalui pembiasaan ibadah, seperti membaca doa, tahfiz Al-Qur'an, salat Dhuha dan salat Zuhur berjamaah, penerapan budaya 5S (Senyum, Salam, Sapa, Sopan, dan Santun), penegakan disiplin yang bernuansa pembinaan, integrasi nilai-nilai Islam dalam proses pembelajaran, serta penciptaan lingkungan sekolah yang religius.

Adapun tantangan yang dihadapi meliputi belum optimalnya kesadaran dan konsistensi sebagian peserta didik dalam mengamalkan nilai-nilai religius, pengaruh lingkungan pergaulan dan media digital, serta perbedaan latar belakang pembinaan keagamaan di lingkungan keluarga. Dengan demikian, budaya sekolah terbukti menjadi salah satu faktor penting dalam pengembangan karakter religius peserta didik melalui proses pembiasaan, keteladanan, dan internalisasi nilai-nilai Islam secara berkelanjutan.

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Corresponding Author:

Nia Atikah Rahma

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia; nia0301192110@uinsu.ac.id

Introduction

Education serves as a strategic instrument for shaping human resources that are not only intellectually outstanding but also possess moral, spiritual, and social qualities (Agustin et al., 2024). This orientation aligns with the goals of national education, which prioritize faith, piety, noble character, knowledge, independence, creativity, and responsibility as essential components of student development (Sirait dkk., 2024). Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System also affirms that education is directed toward developing the potential of learners to become individuals who possess faith and piety toward God Almighty, noble character, knowledge, creativity, and independence, and who are democratic and responsible (Basri & Hasibuan, 2024). Thus, educational success is not measured solely by academic achievement, but also by the educational institution's ability to shape the character of learners as part of the holistic goal of education (Mubarok et al., 2023).

The urgency of character strengthening has become increasingly critical amidst social changes and the evolution of digital technology, both of which significantly impact the lives of students (Nurmala & Mastor, 2026). Easy access to information, shifting patterns of social interaction, and exposure to diverse cultural forms offer positive opportunities for student development; yet, at the same time, they present challenges regarding the shaping of their behavior and morals. Various issues related to adolescent behavior—such as bullying, violence, indiscipline, and irresponsible social media use demonstrate that advancements in knowledge and technology do not always keep pace with character development (Basri, 2023). This situation demonstrates that schools are not only expected to produce students with academic proficiency but also need to provide an educational environment capable of shaping

habits, attitudes, and behaviors that align with moral and religious values (Nazmi & Irsyad, 2024).

In the context of Islamic education, religious character is a crucial dimension that requires continuous development. Religious character encompasses not only a learner's ability to understand religious teachings but also the capacity to internalize and apply values such as faith, acts of worship, moral conduct, discipline, responsibility, and social concern and to exhibit behavior consistent with Islamic teachings in daily life (Khairunisa dkk., 2025). Such character cannot be shaped solely through the process of Islamic Religious Education instruction in the classroom, as the internalization of values requires a continuous process of habituation and experience (Azzam & supratama, 2025). Therefore, schools occupy a strategic position as social and moral environments that enable students to find role models, engage in religious practices, reinforce values, and build habits through daily interactions (Adawiyah et al., 2026).

One concept that can be used to understand this process is school culture. School culture does not merely refer to activities or programs organized by the school; rather, it encompasses a set of values, norms, beliefs, habits, traditions, patterns of interaction, symbols, and practices that are developed and maintained by the entire school community. With this understanding, school culture can be viewed as a value system that guides how members of the school community think, behave, interact, make decisions, and carry out educational activities (Basri, 2023). Therefore, a school culture oriented towards religious values cannot be adequately assessed merely by the presence of congregational prayers, Quranic recitation (tadarus), Quran memorization (tahfiz), joint prayers, or other religious activities; rather, it must be viewed in terms of the extent to which the values underpinning these activities are present across various aspects of school life.

This perspective is significant because research on school culture and religious character has evolved to encompass various areas of focus. Previous studies indicate that the habitual practice of religious activities, teachers serving as role models, discipline, and the structuring of the school environment play a role in fostering students' religious character (Azizah et al., 2025; Hasan et al., 2026). Other research also shows that consistent religious practices can strengthen school culture and help students develop behaviors aligned with religious values. These developments indicate that the study of school culture has shifted from a general focus on character education toward a more specific emphasis on the processes of habituation and the internalization of religious values within school life.

Nevertheless, the evolution of this research indicates that each study places its emphasis differently. The study by Rosadi et al. (2025), for instance, explains the relationship between school culture and religious character, with student discipline serving as a mediating mechanism. These findings make a significant contribution by

demonstrating that cultural values do not automatically translate into character; rather, they require behavioral pathways that allow these values to be consistently enacted. However, as this approach focuses on the relationships between variables, it does not yet provide an in-depth understanding of how cultural values are constructed and interpreted by principals, teachers, and students in their daily lives. Meanwhile, research employing a qualitative approach has succeeded in describing habituation, role modeling, religious activities, and the school environment in a more contextual manner; however, research attention still tends to focus on the forms of religious culture implementation and the factors that either support or hinder it.

More recent research has begun to expand the study by positioning school culture as a space for the internalization of broader values. Studies on school culture based on Islamic values, for example, show that religious values can be integrated through school vision, example, habituation, social interaction and the educational environment. These developments demonstrate that school culture is no longer understood merely as a set of routine activities; instead, it is increasingly positioned as an environment that enables religious values to be present in the lives of the school community. Nevertheless, there remains room to deepen the relationships between these elements particularly regarding how the values formulated by the school are translated into practice, how those practices are sustained as habits, and how those habits evolve into the students' religious awareness and behavior.

Based on that comparison, the research gap does not lie in a lack of studies regarding school culture and religious character. Such studies have evolved and yielded various findings concerning habituation, role modeling, discipline, religious activities, the school environment, and parental involvement. A gap that still requires clarification is how these various elements interconnect as an integrated value system within the process of shaping students' religious character. In other words, while previous research has extensively described the elements of school culture, it has not yet fully provided an in-depth explanation of the mechanisms by which these elements are integrated into school life. In reality, however, religious character is not formed through a single, isolated activity; rather, it emerges from a recurring process involving values fostered by the school, the example set by teachers, implemented rules, established habits, social interactions, and an environment that reinforces those values.

This issue highlights the need for a shift in perspective when examining school culture. School culture should be understood not merely by asking what religious activities are conducted, but also by considering the values underpinning those activities, how those values are translated into habits, how principals and teachers set an example, how rules and discipline reinforce values, how student interactions shape religious experiences, and how all these elements are sustained to become an integral part of school life. This perspective allows school culture to be understood as a system

operating through the interplay of values, practices, actors, habits, and the environment. Consequently, the mere existence of a religious program cannot automatically be equated with school culture unless the values embedded within it are genuinely present and internalized in the behavior of the school community.

This context is relevant to the situation at Ar-Rahman Percut Private Junior High School, which develops an education system with an Islamic orientation and integrates the cultivation of religious character into school life. Preliminary observations indicate that the school implements various religious practices, including the "5S" culture (smiling, greeting, addressing others, and demonstrating politeness and courtesy), congregational prayers, Quranic recitation and memorization (tadarus and tahfiz), communal prayers, character building, and various other Islamic activities. This practice is integrated into the school's daily routine and involves various members of the school community. This situation demonstrates an effort to embed religious values into school life, making Ar-Rahman Percut Private Junior High School a relevant setting for examining how school culture is established and implemented in the process of fostering students' religious character.

However, initial observations also indicate that the process is not without its complexities. Student consistency in adhering to religious practices varies, while differences in family backgrounds influence their religious habits and behavior. Furthermore, the continued development of character outside the school environment requires the involvement of and synergy between the school and parents. This condition shows that the existence of religious programs cannot be seen as evidence that all the values developed by the school have been internalized in the same way in each student. In fact, these dynamics show the importance of understanding the process of how school culture is formed, maintained, strengthened and internalized by the school community.

Given these conditions, this study aims to analyze school culture as an integrated value system rather than merely a collection of religious programs. The analysis focuses on the interrelationships among school values and vision, leadership, teachers acting as role models, the cultivation of religious habits, rules and discipline, social interactions, the school environment, and parental involvement in the process of developing students' religious character. This focus is important because it enables research to uncover processes that cannot be explained merely by measuring relationships between variables or describing school activities. The study seeks to understand how religious values are translated into practice, how those practices become habits, how habits are reinforced by the school environment, and how this process contributes to the internalization of religious character among students.

Thus, the novelty of this study lies not merely in the context of Ar-Rahman Percut Private Junior High School, but primarily in the analytical focus on school culture as a value system integrated into the development of religious character. This

study seeks to elucidate the relationships among values, leadership, role modeling, habituation, discipline, social interaction, the school environment, and parental involvement as interconnected elements in the process of internalizing religious character. With this perspective, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how school culture does not merely generate routine religious activities but can evolve into a value system that shapes students' ways of thinking, attitudes, and behaviors. Based on these considerations, this study is titled "School Culture in the Development of Religious Character at Ar-Rahman Private Junior High School, Percut."

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach and is descriptive in nature. A qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the school culture phenomenon regarding the development of students' religious character, achieved by observing the activities, behaviors, and interactions as well as the meanings constructed by all members of the school community (Sugiyono, 2019).

The research was conducted at Ar-Rahman Private Junior High School in Percut, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra. The research site was selected based on the fact that the school is an Islamic educational institution that consistently implements various religious practices as part of character building for its students such as the "5S" culture (Smiling, Greeting, Saying Hello, Politeness, and Courtesy), congregational prayers, Quranic recitation (tadarus) and memorization (tahfiz), communal prayers, and other religious activities that serve as the school's distinctive features.

The research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique, whereby informants were chosen based on their knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in the implementation of the school culture. The key informants in this study included the school principal, the deputy principal for student affairs, the Islamic Religious Education teacher, homeroom teachers, religious activity coordinators, and several students selected based on their active participation in the school's religious programs.

The data sources for this study consist of both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly through in-depth interviews with all informants, observations of school cultural activities, and interactions within the school environment. Meanwhile, secondary data were gathered from various relevant documents, such as the school profile, vision and mission statements, school regulations, student affairs work programs, religious activity schedules, character development manuals, documentation of religious activities, event photographs, school archives, and other documents related to the development of students' religious character.

Data collection was conducted through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Passive-participatory observation was employed to monitor various

religious-cultural activities at the school, such as the practice of exchanging greetings, communal prayers, congregational prayers, Quranic recitation, Quran memorization activities, teacher-student interactions, and student behavior in daily life. The observation aimed to gather factual data regarding the implementation of school culture related to the cultivation of religious character.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, meaning the researcher had a set of guiding questions based on the research focus while still allowing informants the flexibility to share their experiences, views, and explanations in greater depth. Interviews with the school principal focused on the policies, strategies, and efforts undertaken to establish and cultivate a religious school culture. Interviews with teachers aimed to gather information regarding the implementation of this religious culture within the learning process and through routine practices in the school environment, as well as the teachers' role in instilling religious values in the students. Meanwhile, interviews with students aim to gather information regarding their experiences participating in various religious practices at the school, their perceptions of the implemented school culture, and the changes in their religious attitudes and behaviors experienced while being part of the school environment.

Documentation techniques were employed to supplement data obtained from observations and interviews by gathering various documents related to school culture and the development of religious character. These documents included the school's vision and mission, work programs, religious activity schedules, school regulations, character development modules or guidelines, activity photographs, meeting minutes, and other archives relevant to the research focus. Data validity was verified using triangulation techniques, specifically source triangulation, technique triangulation, and time triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the school principal, teachers, and students. Technique triangulation involved comparing data gathered through observation, interviews, and documentation, whereas time triangulation was carried out by collecting data at different times to verify the consistency of the information obtained.

Data analysis employed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, which comprises three stages: data condensation, data display, and the drawing and verification of conclusions. During the data condensation stage, the researcher selected, simplified, categorized, coded, and organized data derived from observations, interviews, and documentation in alignment with the research focus. The data presentation stage is conducted through a narrative description supported by tables, matrices, or charts, enabling a more systematic understanding of the relationships between findings. Subsequently, the drawing and verification of conclusions take place continuously throughout the research process by identifying patterns, themes, and interconnections within the data, as well as cross-checking

research findings, until a credible conclusion is reached regarding school culture and the development of students' religious character at SMP Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut.

Results And Discussion

Result

Implementation of School Culture in the Development of Religious Character

Based on research findings derived from interviews, observations, and documentation, the implementation of school culture to foster religious character at SMP Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut is carried out through various habitual practices and activities integrated into daily school life. The findings indicate that the development of religious character is not limited to Islamic Religious Education lessons but is also realized through the habitual practice of acts of worship, the cultivation of polite and courteous behavior and discipline, and the role-modeling and interactions between teachers and students.

Based on the overall findings, the implementation of school culture in the development of religious character at SMP Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut can be observed through several primary forms, namely:

Cultivating Religious Observance as School Culture

Based on an interview with Farina Amalia an Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teacher and homeroom teacher at Ar-Rahman Percut Private Junior High School it was found that the practice of religious observance is a component of the school culture, carried out routinely from the moment students arrive on campus until the end of the school day. She explained that, prior to the start of lessons, students participate in communal prayers, Quran memorization (tahfiz) activities, Dhuha prayer, and congregational Zuhur prayer as part of the daily routine.

"At this school, religious observances have become part of the daily routine. Before lessons begin, students recite prayers together, followed by Quran memorization activities. There are also congregational Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers. Consequently, the children have become accustomed to these religious activities, as they are carried out every day."

He also explained that this practice is carried out consistently so that religious values are not only applied within the school environment but also become a habit for students in their daily lives.

"We hope that the activities practiced at this school do not stop when the students go home. If they are accustomed to praying, reading the Quran, performing congregational prayers, and participating in religious activities every day, hopefully, these habits will carry over into their home lives."

Observations indicate that before lessons begin, all students participate in a group prayer led by the teacher, followed by Tahfiz (Quran memorization) activities in accordance with the school schedule. The researcher also observed that students perform Dhuha and Zuhur prayers in congregation under teacher supervision as part of the school's routine activities. Documentation – including the daily school schedule,

religious habituation programs, and records of religious activities indicates that communal prayer, Quran memorization (tahfiz), Dhuha prayer, and congregational Zuhur prayer are scheduled activities carried out regularly as part of the school culture.

Based on the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, it is evident that the practice of religious observance has become part of the school culture at Ar-Rahman Private Junior High School in Percut, implemented continuously through various religious activities integrated into the students' daily lives.

5S Culture in Shaping Students' Morals

In addition to the regular practice of acts of worship, the school culture is also embodied through the implementation of the "5S" culture Senyum (Smile), Salam (Greet/Shake Hands), Sapa (Say Hello), Sopan (Polite), and Santun (Courteous) in daily interactions between teachers and students, as well as among the students themselves. According to an interview with Farina Amalia, this culture is practiced consistently from the moment students arrive at school until the conclusion of learning activities.

"We also encourage students to smile, offer a greeting, and say hello when they encounter their teachers. Students are also accustomed to kissing their teachers' hands upon arriving at and leaving school. This is a simple way to teach them to show respect for their teachers and for older people."

He added that the success of the 5S culture depends not only on offering advice but also on the example set by teachers in their daily lives.

"If it is conveyed merely as advice, children might quickly forget. That is why teachers must also set an example. When teachers arrive, they should greet the students. In this way, the children see firsthand what proper conduct looks like in practice."

Based on observations, the researcher noted that teachers welcomed students to the school grounds by offering greetings and addressing them directly. The students were observed returning the greetings, performing the hand-kissing gesture, and interacting politely while on the school premises. Documentation—including school rules, character-building programs, and records of school activities—indicates that the "5S" culture is a practice implemented in school life to foster attitudes of courtesy, respect, and mutual regard. Findings from interviews, observations, and documentation reveal that the 5S culture has become an integral part of the school environment, consistently applied in daily interactions, thereby supporting the development of students' moral values and religious character.

A Culture of Discipline in the Development of Religious Character

The school culture in developing religious character is also seen through the application of discipline. Based on an interview with Mirdiana Putri Ibsah, PAI teacher, discipline is instilled through the habit of arriving on time, dressing according

to regulations, participating in religious activities, and obeying school rules and regulations.

He said:

"We constantly remind students to be disciplined – from arriving on time and wearing the proper attire to participating in religious activities. We explain to them that discipline is also part of a Muslim's responsibility. If a student commits a violation, we do not immediately impose harsh punishments; instead, we usually provide guidance – such as having them read the Quran or memorize short surahs. The most important thing is for the students to understand their mistakes and not repeat them."

Based on the interview results, it is evident that discipline at Ar-Rahman Percut Private Junior High School serves not merely as a set of school rules but as part of a culture aimed at fostering a sense of responsibility and religious character among the students.

Factors Influencing School Culture in the Development of Religious Character

Based on an interview with Mr. Zainuddin Hasibuan, the Principal of Ar Rahman Private Junior High School in Percut, the successful development of students' religious character is inextricably linked to the role of school leadership. He emphasized that the principal must serve as a role model for the entire school community by demonstrating religious conduct in daily life. Furthermore, the school has established various religious programs implemented on a regular basis to ensure that religious values become an ingrained part of the students' culture.

He/She revealed:

As the school principal, I strive to set an example for both teachers and students – such as by making it a habit to offer greetings, participating in congregational prayers, attending Quran recitation sessions, and motivating the entire school community to uphold Islamic character. A religious culture cannot be established through mere directives; it must be directly modeled by the leadership and all teachers.

The principal also added that all teachers are entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of a religious culture within the school, thereby fostering an environment that supports the development of students' character. The Islamic Religious Education teacher explained that the principal's leadership has a significant impact on the implementation of this religious culture. According to the teacher, various religious programs are able to run successfully thanks to the principal's full support.

He stated:

The principal consistently supports every religious activity. He not only provides guidance but also actively participates in various events such as congregational prayers, the observance of major Islamic holidays, and character building for students. This motivates the teachers to be more enthusiastic in guiding their students.

The principal explained that religious character education cannot be carried out solely within the school environment but requires support from parents at home. Therefore, the school continuously maintains communication with parents through parent meetings and other communication channels.

He said:

The school consistently encourages parents to collaborate in nurturing their children's character. Habits cultivated at school such as performing prayers on time, reading the Quran, and maintaining good manners are expected to be practiced at home as well, ensuring the character-building process remains continuous.

The PAI teacher said that parental involvement really determines the success of developing students' religious character. According to him, students who get used to worshipping at home tend to find it easier to participate in religious activities at school.

He explained:

"We observe that students who receive parental attention regarding their religious practices tend to be more disciplined in attending congregational prayers, memorizing the Quran, and maintaining proper conduct at school. Therefore, we continuously foster communication between teachers and parents to ensure a unified approach to character development."

Challenges in Developing Religious Character

Based on observations and interviews conducted by the researcher with the principal and the Islamic Religious Education teacher at Ar Rahman Private Junior High School in Percut, it was found that the implementation of school culture in fostering students' religious character has proceeded quite well through various religious habituation programs. These programs include congregational prayers, Quran recitation (*tadarus*), *tahsin* (Quranic recitation improvement) lessons, the practice of exchanging greetings, and other religious activities carried out on a regular basis.

Nevertheless, the school still faces several challenges during implementation. These challenges stem from both internal factors related to the students and external factors originating outside the school environment. This was highlighted by the Principal of Ar Rahman Private Junior High School (SMP) in Percut, as follows.

Building religious character is not a task that can be accomplished in a short time. Schools serve as only one setting for character development; success in this area is also influenced by the family, social circles, and the students' own willingness to incorporate religious values into their daily lives.

Based on this, several challenges in developing religious character at SMPS Ar-Rahman Percut are:

Lack of Awareness and Consistency Among Some Students

One of the most common challenges schools face is that some students still lack the awareness to engage in religious activities consistently. Although students

participate in religious activities while at school, some do so only because of rules or teacher supervision, rather than out of genuine personal conviction. As the Islamic Religious Education teacher explained:

"There are still some students who participate in religious activities only because a teacher is supervising them. When the teacher is not around, some start joking, arrive late to the prayer room, or lack seriousness during Quran recitation sessions. This presents a challenge, as our goal is not merely to ensure compliance with school rules but also to foster a sense of genuine awareness within them."

Based on that statement, the principal further emphasized that religious character is successfully cultivated when it becomes a habit stemming from the students' own awareness. Therefore, teachers continuously provide guidance and set an example so that students engage in religious activities not merely to comply with rules, but because they understand the importance of worship.

The Influence of Social Circles and Digital Media

The next challenge stems from students' social environments outside of school, as well as the increasingly intensive use of social media and digital devices. According to the principal, while technological advancements offer many benefits, they also bring influences that can diminish students' interest in religious activities if not accompanied by proper supervision.

He explained:

Nowadays, students interact more frequently with social media and mobile phones. They spend a significant amount of time playing games or browsing social media rather than reading the Quran or reviewing their memorization. Consequently, the school strives to foster an understanding that enables them to use technology wisely.

The Islamic Religious Education teacher also stated:

Peer influence is also significant. There are students who are diligent at school, yet when they find themselves in a negative social environment, their religious habits begin to wane. Therefore, we constantly remind them to choose friends who exert a positive influence.

Differences in Family Backgrounds

Interview results indicate that students' diverse family backgrounds pose a challenge in the formation of religious character. Not all students are accustomed to the same religious practices at home; consequently, their abilities and habits vary. As the school principal noted:

Some students have been accustomed since childhood to performing congregational prayers and reading the Quran at home, while others have not had this experience. Consequently, teachers must provide guidance tailored to each student's specific circumstances.

The Islamic religious education teacher then added that:

While all students at school follow the same routine, they return to diverse family environments after school hours. Some parents actively support their children, whereas others due to work commitments are unable to provide optimal supervision regarding their children's religious observances.

Based on the interview results, it is evident that the challenges in fostering religious character at SMP Swasta Ar Rahman Percut include (1) a lack of awareness and consistency among some students in practicing religious values, (2) the influence of peer environments and uncontrolled use of digital media, and (3) disparities in family backgrounds and upbringing styles. These challenges are common in the educational landscape and require collaboration among the school, parents, and the community to ensure the optimal development of students' religious character.

Discussion

The school culture at Ar-Rahman Percut Private Junior High School is not merely manifested through the organization of various religious activities; rather, it has evolved into a value system that shapes all the activities of the school community. These religious values are internalized through consistent habituation, becoming an integral part of the students' daily behavior. Consequently, the school culture serves not only as a set of rules governing school life but also as a medium for internalizing Islamic values, aimed at continuously shaping the students' religious character.

The most dominant religious value identified in this study is the value of *ubudiyah* that is, the value concerning the relationship between human beings and Allah SWT (Prayoga & Sahri, 2024). This value is reflected in the routine practice of reciting prayers before and after lessons, performing congregational *Dhuha* and *Dhuhr* prayers, engaging in Quran memorization activities, and participating in various other religious activities. These practices demonstrate that the school not only imparts religious knowledge to students but also fosters direct religious experiences through the consistent observance of acts of worship. That experience serves as a process of internalization, enabling learners to form habits of worship as part of their daily lives.

According to Muhaimin, a religious culture in schools is a process of habituating religious values manifested through all educational activities so that these values do not remain merely at the cognitive level but evolve into the attitudes and behaviors of the students (Ma'rufah, 2020). This perspective indicates that the habitual practice of acts of worship plays a crucial role in shaping religious character, as character is not formed merely through the transmission of information but rather through repeated experience. This view is reinforced by Thomas Lickona, who explains that character education must integrate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Darwanti dkk., 2025). In the context of this study, the habitual practice of acts of worship serves as a bridge connecting religious knowledge with actual practice, ensuring that

students not only understand the obligation to worship but also become accustomed to performing it.

In addition to fostering a relationship between individuals and Allah SWT, the school culture at SMP Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut cultivates moral values reflected in daily social interactions. These values are instilled through the practice of the "5S" culture *Senyum* (smiling), *Salam* (greeting/saluting), *Sapa* (addressing others warmly), *Sopan* (being polite), and *Santun* (being courteous) as well as through showing respect for teachers, using polite language, and encouraging mutual respect among all members of the school community. These findings indicate that religious character is understood comprehensively; it relates not only to the observance of acts of worship but also to social behavior that reflects noble character. Thus, the religiosity fostered by the school is not merely ritualistic in nature but is also manifested in interpersonal relationships (*hablum minannas*).

This perspective aligns with the thought of Al-Ghazali, who explains that character (*akhlaq*) is a trait ingrained within a person, thereby prompting the spontaneous emergence of good behavior without the need for lengthy deliberation (Madhar, 2024). Such character traits do not emerge instantly; rather, they are cultivated through continuous practice (*riyadhah*) and the habituation (*ta'wid*) of specific behaviors. Consequently, a school culture that accustoms students to being polite, respecting teachers, and maintaining good relationships with others represents a tangible form of character building through direct experience (Kasri, 2021). This view is also supported by Lickona, who emphasizes that setting an example is a crucial element of character education, as students tend to imitate the behaviors they observe daily (Susanti, 2022). In this context, school culture serves as a means that enables students to learn through real-life examples provided by teachers and the entire school community.

This study also found that discipline is an integral part of developing religious character. The discipline implemented in the school is not merely interpreted as adherence to rules and regulations, but as an expression of a Muslim's responsibility in fulfilling a trust. This is evident in the habitual practice of arriving on time, dressing in accordance with guidelines, participating in all school activities, and carrying out various religious observances in an orderly manner. Notably, the disciplinary approach emphasizes guidance rather than punishment, thereby encouraging students to understand the meaning behind each rule.

According to Mulyasa, an effective school culture is not a culture that is built through control and punishment alone, but rather a culture that is able to foster students' internal awareness of the values they believe in (Rijal et al., 2023). Thus, discipline becomes an integral part of character when students comply with rules because they understand the benefits and values inherent in them, rather than merely out of fear of sanctions. This analysis indicates that the discipline implemented at SMP

Swasta Ar-Rahman Percut is geared towards fostering self-discipline defined as the ability to exercise self-control based on moral and religious awareness.

Another equally important finding is the integration of religious values into the learning process. Islamic values are not merely taught through the Islamic Religious Education subject but are also linked to various other subjects, enabling students to understand that all knowledge is connected to Islamic teachings. This approach demonstrates the school's effort to eliminate the dichotomy between religious and secular knowledge through integrative learning.

This view aligns with the ideas of Abuddin Nata, who asserts that Islamic education must integrate knowledge with the values of Tawhid (divine oneness), enabling students to perceive all knowledge as a reflection of the greatness of Allah SWT. Such integration is crucial, as it fosters a religious mindset that does not separate academic and spiritual aspects (Basri & Mubarak, 2023). Thus, the learning process not only results in mastery of the subject matter but also strengthens the students' religious awareness. In addition to the learning process, the internalization of religious values is further reinforced by the school's physical environment, which reflects an Islamic atmosphere. The presence of a mosque, Islamic posters, calligraphy, moral slogans, and various facilities supporting religious activities demonstrates that the school environment has been designed as a medium for character education. Such an environment provides visual and psychological stimuli that indirectly remind students to consistently conduct themselves in accordance with Islamic teachings.

Conclusion

Research findings indicate that the school culture at Ar-Rahman Percut Private Junior High School fosters the development of religious character through daily habits and practices within the school environment. This culture is manifested through habitual acts of worship such as communal prayers, Quran memorization (Tahfiz), Dhuha prayers, and congregational Zuhur prayers as well as the implementation of the "5S" culture (Smiling, Greeting, Addressing, Politeness, and Courtesy), the enforcement of discipline through a guidance-oriented approach, the integration of Islamic values into learning activities, and the role of teachers as role models in their social interactions with students. These findings show that school culture is not only present in the form of stand-alone religious programs, but also through the relationship between values, habits, role models, rules, social interactions and the school environment. Conceptually, these findings strengthen the understanding that school culture in the context of Islamic education can be understood as a value system that works through repeated practices and is strengthened by life with the school community. Thus, this study contributes to the study of school culture by demonstrating that the development of religious character needs to be understood as a process involving the interconnectedness of various elements of school culture, rather than merely as the implementation of religious activities.

This development process is supported by the principal's role in guiding school policy, the exemplary conduct of teachers, the involvement of the school community in establishing routine practices, and a school environment that reinforces religious observance. At the same time, the study identifies challenges such as the inconsistent participation of some students in these routines, the influence of peer circles and digital media, and the varying religious habits students bring from their family backgrounds. The findings indicate that the mere presence of a school culture does not automatically guarantee the uniform development of religious character among all students. Therefore, this study does not aim to establish a causal link regarding the effectiveness of school culture; rather, it seeks to describe how the school culture is implemented, how its elements interrelate, and the conditions that either support or challenge the process of fostering students' religious character.

This research has limitations in the context of research conducted at one school and using a qualitative descriptive approach with informants consisting of school principals, teachers and students. With these characteristics, the research findings provide an in-depth understanding of the context of Ar-Rahman Percut Private Middle School, but are not intended to be statistically generalized to other schools. Furthermore, this study has not measured changes in students' religious character longitudinally, nor has it compared school cultural practices with those of schools possessing different characteristics. Future research could expand upon this work through multi-site studies across schools with varying characteristics, longitudinal studies to examine the sustainability of religious habituation, or a mixed-methods approach that combines a qualitative understanding of school culture processes with measurements of students' religious character development. Future research could also broaden the perspective by involving parents or other parties outside the school to gain a more comprehensive picture of the continuity of religious culture between the school environment and the students' lives outside of school.

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for qualitative educational research. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation in interviews and observations was voluntary. Information obtained from participants was used solely for academic purposes, with due attention to confidentiality and the protection of participants' identities.

Artificial Intelligence Use Statement

The authors used artificial intelligence (AI) tools in a limited manner to assist with language editing, grammatical refinement, and improving the readability of the

manuscript. AI was not used for data collection, qualitative data analysis, interpretation of the findings, or formulation of the conclusions. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the article.

Author Contribution Statement

Nia Atikah Rahma contributed to the conceptualization of the study, investigation, data collection, qualitative data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the original draft. Enny Nazrah Pulungan contributed to the research methodology, supervision, validation of the findings, interpretation of the results, critical review, and editing of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version of the article.

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