



Strengthening Spiritual Character and Empathy through School Religious Activities

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Abstract: *This study aims to analyze the role of school religious activities in strengthening students' spiritual character and empathy at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu. The background of this research stems from the phenomenon of weakening spiritual character and low social empathy among students, which requires an educational approach based on religious values. The research method used is a qualitative approach with a descriptive study design. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews with teachers and students, as well as documentation of school religious activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation (tadarus), regular Islamic studies, and religious social activities. The results show that religious activities play an important role in instilling spiritual values such as faith, honesty, patience, and sincerity, while also fostering social empathy through practices of sharing, caring, and helping among students. Teachers and mentors contribute significantly as role models in developing these characters through humanistic and contextual approaches. Moreover, the religious and participatory school environment serves as a key supporting factor in the successful internalization of character values.*

Kata Kunci : Karakter Spiritual, Empati,

INTRODUCTION

Character education is the fundamental basis for shaping students into individuals with noble character, responsibility, and high moral awareness(Ajeng, 2024; Khasanah, 2023). Amid the rapid advancement of science and technology, education is not only required to produce intellectually intelligent students but also spiritually and emotionally mature individuals. Spiritual character and empathy are essential aspects in facing global challenges marked by individualism and moral decline(Sehati et al., 2024; Wu, 2024). Schools, as formal educational institutions, hold a major responsibility in internalizing these values through various curricular and extracurricular activities. Therefore, spiritual and empathetic character education must be developed systematically so that students can



balance intellectual intelligence with moral intelligence. This effort forms an integral part of the national education mission to develop the holistic Indonesian human being.

Schools hold a strategic position as agents of character formation through intracurricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities (Rahayu & Dong, 2023; Sosiden & Viraek, 2021; Wulandari et al., 2025). Religious activities at school—such as congregational prayers, Islamic studies, collective supplications, and religious celebrations—serve as effective means of instilling spiritual values (Latifah & Nurhikmah, 2024; Mustamir & Tang, 2025). These activities not only function as forms of worship but also as social learning media that nurture empathy and care among students. In this context, teachers play a central role as moral exemplars and facilitators who guide students to practice religious values in their daily lives. Therefore, strengthening spiritual character and empathy through school religious activities becomes an important strategy in creating a religious and harmonious educational environment.

The phenomena of moral decadence, low social empathy, and weakened spirituality among the younger generation have become serious issues in the world of education. Numerous cases such as bullying, intolerance, and excessive consumerism reflect a crisis of values within the school environment. This condition underscores the urgency of implementing character education based on religious values as both a preventive and corrective measure. Spirituality and empathy values need to be revived through direct experiences and habituation within school life. Character education delivered merely through theoretical instruction is often ineffective without role modeling and practical engagement. Therefore, school religious activities serve as a vital medium in building moral awareness and strengthening social bonds among students.

Although various religious programs have been implemented in schools, their execution is often not optimal in shaping students' spiritual character and empathy. Some students participate in religious activities merely out of obligation rather than intrinsic value awareness. Furthermore, lack of supervision, limited activity variation, and underdeveloped roles of teacher mentors hinder the achievement of intended goals. Many schools also tend to conduct religious activities ceremonially without emphasizing the moral learning behind



them. As a result, these activities have not fully touched the affective domain of students or fostered empathetic behavior within the school environment. This reflects a gap between the implementation of religious activities and the expected outcomes of character formation.

A study by Lestari (2021) revealed that school religious activities have a significant influence on the formation of students' religious character, particularly in the aspects of worship discipline and social responsibility. Activities such as shalat dhuha and Qur'an recitation (tadarus) were proven to consistently enhance students' spiritual awareness. However, the study mainly focused on personal religiosity and did not explore the dimension of social empathy among students. Moreover, its descriptive approach did not deeply examine students' experiences in internalizing spiritual values contextually. This opens an opportunity to explore further how religious activities can shape empathy as an integral part of spiritual character.

Another study by Rahman and Sari (2022) found that religious activities involving social interaction—such as social service and inter-class prayer sessions—can strengthen empathy and solidarity among students. Their findings indicate that collaborative religious activities are more effective in fostering empathy than individual ones. Nevertheless, the study did not explicitly discuss the interconnection between spirituality and empathy as two mutually reinforcing character aspects. Thus, there remains a research gap for a qualitative study that examines both dimensions in depth within the context of school religious activities.

Based on previous studies, it appears that research on strengthening spiritual character and empathy through school religious activities remains limited and often treated separately. Few studies holistically examine how these two character aspects interact and develop through religious experiences in school. Furthermore, most existing studies focus on cognitive and behavioral dimensions, while the affective domain—including spiritual awareness and empathy—remains underexplored. Therefore, this study offers novelty by employing a qualitative approach to explore deeply students' experiences in the process of forming spiritual character and empathy through school religious activities.



The purpose of this research is to analyze and describe how school religious activities play a role in strengthening students' spiritual character and empathy. It also aims to identify the types of religious activities most effective in developing spiritual awareness and social concern. In addition, the study seeks to explore students' and teachers' perceptions of the implementation of religious activities and their impact on daily behavior. Thus, the research findings are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of character education based on religious values and practical references for schools in designing more meaningful and contextual character development programs.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive study design (Fitria Widiyani Roosinda, Ninik Sri Lestari, 2021). This approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the process and meaning behind the strengthening of students' spiritual character and empathy through religious activities conducted at school. Rather than focusing on numerical data, this approach emphasizes the interpretation of meanings that emerge from social and religious phenomena within both learning activities and routine religious practices in the school. The study was conducted at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu, a madrasah actively implementing various religious programs such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation (tadarus), regular Islamic studies (pengajian), and celebrations of Islamic holidays. This school was selected because of its diverse and consistent religious programs in character development. Moreover, its religious social and cultural environment provides ample opportunities for the researcher to explore how spiritual values and empathy are formed through these activities.

The research subjects consisted of the principal, Islamic education teachers, religious activity supervisors, and students who actively participated in religious programs. The selection of informants was based on purposive sampling, meaning they were chosen according to their roles and involvement in the activities under study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore the informants' perspectives and experiences related to the development of spiritual and empathetic values at school, while observations were used to



identify students' behaviors and social interactions during religious activities. Documentation, including photos, program schedules, and mentoring records, was utilized to support and strengthen the field data.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which involves three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Wijaya, 2020). Data reduction was carried out by selecting and categorizing relevant information according to the research focus. Data display was presented narratively to reveal patterns and relationships among the observed phenomena. Finally, conclusions were drawn inductively based on empirical findings emerging from the field. To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher applied source and method triangulation by comparing interview results with observations and documentation to maintain consistency and credibility of the information.

RESULT AND FINDINGS

1. Habitual Worship as a Foundation for Strengthening Spiritual Character

Congregational worship activities such as shalat dhuha and shalat dzuhur at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu serve as the main programs for shaping students' spiritual character. This practice is carried out routinely every day in the school's prayer hall (mushala) before and after learning activities. Students are guided to perform wudu properly, pray in congregation with focus and sincerity, and listen to short religious talks (tausiyah) delivered by teachers. These activities establish a religious routine that instills discipline, sincerity, and spiritual responsibility in students. Through consistent worship practices, students gradually learn to connect their daily activities with religious values.

Based on observations and interviews, most students stated that performing shalat dhuha in congregation helps them feel calmer and more focused during study. Islamic education teachers (PAI teachers) emphasized that congregational prayer serves as an effective medium to train time discipline and togetherness. Students who were previously often late have now developed spiritual awareness that worship is not merely an obligation but a necessity to draw closer to Allah SWT. This habituation process also strengthens students' sense of personal responsibility, as each student has a scheduled duty for cleaning the mushala and maintaining order in the prayer rows (shaf).



In addition to being an act of worship, congregational prayer at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu functions as a form of character education that touches affective and moral domains. Teachers play an active role as *uswah hasanah* (good role models), providing concrete examples of diligence and sincerity in worship. Through such modeling, students learn to emulate positive behavior and internalize spiritual values in their daily lives. This worship activity also fosters collective awareness of the importance of unity and mutual care, as students remind each other to maintain order and focus during prayer.

This activity demonstrates that the formation of spiritual character cannot rely solely on theoretical teaching in Islamic education classes. Religious values are more effectively instilled through direct, consistent, and engaging practice. When students personally experience the meaning of worship, they are better able to grasp the essence of spirituality than through lectures alone. Thus, congregational worship activities at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu play a significant role in nurturing students' discipline, spiritual awareness, and religious responsibility.

The habituation of worship serves as the foundational basis for strengthening spiritual character in the madrasah. The research findings indicate that students who actively participate in routine worship activities exhibit more polite, ethical, and respectful behavior toward teachers and peers. They also show increased motivation to learn and a positive attitude toward their environment. This means that religious worship not only impacts the spiritual aspect but also contributes to the holistic development of students' personalities.

2. The Role of Teachers and the School Environment in Fostering Spiritual Values and Empathy

Teachers play a central role in the success of the spiritual and empathy character-strengthening program at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu. They serve not only as educators but also as moral exemplars and spiritual mentors for students. In every religious activity, teachers demonstrate discipline, patience, and compassion, becoming tangible models for students to emulate. Empathy values, such as helping classmates in need or comforting troubled students, are directly reflected in teachers' daily behavior. This makes the character education process occur naturally through role modeling and habituation.

The religious environment of the madrasah also supports the growth of students' spirituality and empathy. Each classroom is decorated with Qur'anic verses and Hadiths emphasizing noble character, while the school atmosphere always begins with collective



prayers and greetings. Teachers and students habitually greet each other with smiles and mutual respect. This culture creates a positive social climate in which students feel safe, accepted, and valued. In such an environment, empathy naturally develops as students learn to care for and respect others' feelings.

Moreover, the madrasah actively involves parents in supporting religious activities. Communication between teachers and parents is maintained through regular meetings and character development reports. This collaboration reinforces the spiritual values practiced at school so they can continue at home. With parental involvement, character strengthening becomes more sustainable and does not stop at the school level.

In interviews, teachers mentioned that the main challenge in character development lies in maintaining students' behavioral consistency outside school hours. Therefore, religious activities at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu are designed not merely as formal programs but as a culture embedded in daily life. Teachers emphasize the importance of role modeling and emotional closeness so that moral messages are more easily internalized by students.

With the support of all parties—teachers, students, and the school environment—the process of strengthening spiritual character and empathy at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu runs comprehensively. The school has successfully created a religious ecosystem that fosters spiritual awareness while strengthening social bonds among its members. These results demonstrate that character education based on religious activities has a tangible impact on shaping a generation that is faithful, virtuous, and caring toward others.

3. Religious Activities at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu

Religious activities at MTs Islahiyah Kalitidu serve as one of the main pillars in shaping students' spiritual character and empathy. Through a series of well-planned and continuous religious programs, the school strives to instill Islamic values that are not only ritualistic but also applicable in daily life. These activities are designed to foster spiritual awareness, strengthen a sense of empathy toward others, and build a religious and virtuous school culture. The forms of religious activities carried out include daily routines, weekly programs, and special events focused on character development and the cultivation of students' spirituality.

a. Congregational Shalat Dhuha and Shalat Dzuhur



This activity is carried out routinely every day in the school's mushala (prayer hall).

Students are accustomed to performing shalat dhuha before learning begins and shalat dzuhur in congregation after classes end. The goal is to instill discipline in worship, strengthen faith, and build students' spiritual awareness. Through this activity, students learn the values of togetherness, responsibility, and the habit of bringing their hearts closer to Allah SWT in every daily activity.

b. Qur'an Recitation (Tadarus) and Reading Improvement (Tahsin)

This program is held every morning for about 15–20 minutes before classes start. Students read and improve their Qur'an recitation under the guidance of Islamic education teachers (PAI teachers) and assigned ustaz. The tadarus activity aims to develop a religious character and love for the Qur'an, while tahsin trains accuracy, patience, and consistency. Besides strengthening spiritual values, this program also fosters social empathy, as students who are proficient in reading the Qur'an often help their peers who are still learning.

c. Commemoration of Islamic Holidays (Peringatan Hari Besar Islam / PHBI)

The madrasah regularly organizes events to commemorate major Islamic holidays such as the Prophet's Birthday (Maulid Nabi), Isra' Mi'raj, the Islamic New Year, and Nuzulul Qur'an. In these events, students participate as committee members, young preachers, religious poets, and shalawat performers. Through these activities, students not only learn about the historical and spiritual significance of these occasions but also develop empathy and cooperation with their peers. These programs also foster a sense of pride and a strong Islamic identity within the school community.

d. Islamic Studies and Pesantren Kilat (Short-Term Boarding Program)

Islamic study sessions are held every Friday morning or during the month of Ramadan in the form of a pesantren kilat. Topics include moral conduct (akhlaq), respect for teachers and parents, and social awareness. Islamic teachers and external speakers (ustaz or local scholars) deliver inspiring lectures encouraging students to behave politely, honestly, and empathetically. The pesantren kilat also serves as a



platform for practicing discipline, independence, and compassion through collective activities such as communal iftar (buka puasa bersama) and social service.

e. Charity, Almsgiving (Infaq and Sedekah), and Social Service Activities

Every Friday, students are encouraged to bring voluntary donations (infaq) which are collected to support social programs such as assisting underprivileged students, providing aid to orphans, and helping the local community in need. Through these activities, values of empathy and social solidarity are instilled in a tangible way. Students learn to share, help others, and understand the meaning of togetherness in life. This serves as a concrete form of empathetic and religious social character education at the madrasah.

f. Daily Prayers and Dhikr Habituation

Before and after classes, students together with teachers recite prayers and dhikr collectively. This habituation serves as a form of spiritual reflection that cultivates gratitude, sincerity, and awareness of God's presence in every activity. It also strengthens emotional bonds between teachers and students, fosters a religious atmosphere within the school, and nurtures empathy among peers.

CONCLUSION

Religious activities at school play a very significant role in fostering and strengthening the spiritual character and empathy of students. Through routine activities such as congregational prayers, Quran recitation, religious studies, and social-religious activities, students not only gain cognitive religious understanding but also experience the internalization of moral and social values that shape a virtuous personality. The habituation process in a religious school environment encourages students to apply values of honesty, patience, sincerity, and care for others both within the school environment and outside of it.

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