

Strategic Approaches to Enhancing Adolescents' Religious Character through Faith-Based Activities

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze strategies for strengthening adolescents' religious character through community-based nonformal education in Tanjung Tebat Village and to identify supporting and inhibiting factors. The research addresses the inconsistency of religious character development among rural youth outside formal schooling by situating the study within a lifelong learning perspective. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed using field research methods. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, and validated through triangulation across multiple sources. Data analysis involved reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that religious character development is facilitated through nonformal, community-driven learning activities such as *mukhadarah* (religious speech training) and congregational Dhuhr prayers, which function as participatory and experiential learning spaces. These activities not only engage adolescents as learners but also position community religious facilitators as adult learners who continuously adapt their strategies based on social and cultural contexts. Additional emphasis is placed on Qur'an reading proficiency and the internalization of Islamic values, including modest dress practices. The character-building process reflects stages of lifelong learning, including introduction, internalization, habituation, and social implementation, supported by behavioral discipline and community reinforcement. Supporting factors include adolescents' intrinsic motivation, active family engagement, and the commitment of community-based educators. In contrast, inhibiting factors involve the limited presence of male role models and inadequate religious learning facilities. This study highlights the critical role of nonformal education in fostering sustainable religious character development and underscores the importance of community educators' adaptive learning processes in supporting adolescents' moral growth in rural contexts.

Keywords: Character Religious, Faith-Based Activities, Strategic Approach

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents in the current era of globalization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution are experiencing rapid transformations in values and norms driven by the pervasive influence

of information technology, mass media, and cultural exchange. These changes not only affect behavioral patterns but also reshape the ways in which moral and religious values are learned, negotiated, and internalized. Various negative behaviors such as peer violence, substance abuse, dishonesty, neglect of religious obligations, and the adoption of permissive lifestyles reflect an ongoing challenge in fostering *akhlakul karimah* (noble character) among adolescents (Santrock, 2023). Within this dynamic context, the role of educators extends beyond formal instruction, requiring them to act as active, self-directed, and reflective learners who continuously adapt to sociocultural changes and learners' needs.

From an adult learning perspective, educators both in formal and nonformal settings are not passive recipients of technological and social transformation, but agents who engage in lifelong learning processes to develop adaptive pedagogical and moral strategies. Education, therefore, should be understood not only as the transmission of cognitive knowledge but as a holistic process that integrates moral, spiritual, and social development. While national education policies emphasize the formation of individuals with strong character and civic responsibility (Universitas & UU No. 20/2003), in practice many educational approaches remain cognitively oriented and insufficiently support the internalization of religious values (Fitri, Fahrizal, & Puspika Sari, 2024). In Islamic educational thought, *akhlak* constitutes a central objective, guiding individuals to live in accordance with the teachings of Allah SWT and the Prophet Muhammad SAW (Nazifah Fitri Annisa et al., 2024).

In this regard, strengthening adolescents' religious character requires not only structured educational interventions but also the active involvement of educators as lifelong learners who facilitate meaningful, context-based, and participatory learning experiences. This perspective highlights the importance of nonformal and community-based education as flexible spaces where both adolescents and educators engage in continuous moral and spiritual development.

Villages (*desa*) function as critical environments for moral and religious formation, as adolescents' daily lives are deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and religious practices of the community. In such contexts, learning does not occur solely through formal schooling but also through continuous, experience-based interactions that reflect the principles of nonformal and lifelong learning. However, while a substantial body of research has examined character formation within formal educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (Saputra, 2020), humanistic religious education in primary schools (Efendy, 2019), and school-based religious extracurricular activities (Holilurrohman, 2020) there remains a limited understanding of how religious character is developed through everyday, community-based religious practices in rural settings. More importantly, existing studies rarely position community religious facilitators as adult learners who actively construct, adapt, and reflect on their strategies within evolving social and technological contexts.

In addition, although contemporary discourse in education increasingly highlights the integration of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) in learning environments, such perspectives are largely absent in nonformal, rural religious education settings. This creates a significant gap in understanding how lifelong learning processes unfold in communities where technological engagement may be limited, yet moral and religious learning remains ongoing and socially embedded. Therefore, this study addresses a dual gap: (1) the lack of empirical exploration of nonformal, village-based religious education as a space for adolescent character formation, and (2) the limited attention to educators and

community leaders as self-directed, reflective adult learners operating within or in the absence of emerging technological learning ecosystems.

Preliminary field observations in a village in Kabupaten Lahat reveal a discrepancy between normative religious expectations and adolescents' actual practices. Despite efforts by community leaders and religious figures to promote proper observance such as wearing the *jilbab* appropriately, performing congregational prayers, and reading the Qur'an many adolescents demonstrate inconsistent adherence. Some wear the *jilbab* only in formal contexts, prayer practices are irregular, and Qur'anic literacy levels vary considerably. This gap suggests that the presence of rules and instruction alone is insufficient. Instead, it highlights the importance of adaptive strategies employed by community educators, including habituation of religious practices, role modeling, and the integration of religious values into everyday life as part of a continuous, community-based learning process.

This study aims to analyze strategies used to strengthen adolescents' religious character through community-based religious activities in village settings and to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing these strategies. Theoretically, this research integrates character education theory particularly the dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral acting (Lickona, 1991) with perspectives from adult education and lifelong learning. Specifically, this study draws on andragogy, which emphasizes the role of educators as facilitators who support learner autonomy and relevance of learning experiences; experiential learning, which highlights learning through direct participation and reflection in meaningful activities; and self-directed learning, where individuals actively take responsibility for their own learning processes. These frameworks are particularly relevant in nonformal educational contexts, where both adolescents and community religious facilitators engage in continuous, experience-based, and socially situated learning processes. In addition, sociological perspectives on the role of family and community in moral formation further support the understanding of religious character development as a collective and contextual process (Santoso, 2019; Sutisna, Hasanah, & Arifin, 2025).

The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to a deeper understanding of religious character formation within nonformal, rural contexts by bridging character education and adult learning perspectives. Practically, it provides insights for religious educators, village authorities, and community members in designing adaptive, participatory, and contextually relevant religious activities that align with principles of lifelong learning.

Accordingly, this article discusses: (1) the phenomenon of moral and religious challenges among adolescents in village settings; (2) the importance of religious character in Islamic education; (3) strategies employed by religious educators and community actors to strengthen religiosity through participatory and experience-based religious activities; and (4) the supporting and inhibiting factors affecting the implementation of these strategies within a nonformal learning environment.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method, specifically field research, to understand and interpret phenomena as they occur in their natural settings within community-based, nonformal learning environments. A qualitative approach was chosen

because it enables the researcher to collect rich, descriptive data in the form of spoken and written words, observable behavior, and contextual interactions that reflect the actual conditions and lived experiences of the participants. This approach is particularly suitable for capturing the complexity of religious activities carried out by the community and their role in shaping adolescents' religious character in a holistic and context-sensitive manner.

From a nonformal education perspective, a purely quantitative approach may be considered reductionist, as it tends to focus on measuring relationships between variables while overlooking the complexity of adult learning processes, such as reflection, experience, and meaning-making. In contrast, qualitative inquiry allows for a deeper exploration of how learning occurs through participation in everyday religious practices, where both adolescents and community religious facilitators engage in experiential, reflective, and socially situated learning processes.

Furthermore, this approach positions participants not merely as objects of study but as active meaning-makers who continuously interpret and negotiate religious values within their sociocultural context. By emphasizing exploration, interpretation, and contextual depth, qualitative research provides nuanced insights into the processes of lifelong learning embedded in nonformal educational settings. Therefore, the findings are presented in the form of descriptive narratives, highlighting the richness and complexity of participants' experiences rather than reducing them to numerical representations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted in a village in Kabupaten Lahat, South Sumatra Province, Indonesia, in February 2025. The site was purposively selected based on preliminary observations indicating the presence of various community-based religious activities aimed at strengthening adolescents' religious character, albeit with varying levels of participation and outcomes. These conditions make the village a relevant setting for examining nonformal and lifelong learning processes embedded in everyday social and religious practices.

The data sources consisted of key informants, including Islamic Religious Education teachers, village adolescents, and community stakeholders such as the school principal, vice principals (curriculum, student affairs, and infrastructure), and local religious leaders. In this study, adult participants particularly teachers and community religious facilitators are conceptualized as adult learners who actively engage in continuous learning processes. They possess diverse teaching experiences, ranging from formal classroom instruction to informal religious mentoring in community settings. Their learning needs include adapting religious teaching strategies to adolescents' sociocultural realities, strengthening participatory and experience-based approaches, and, to a certain extent, responding to emerging technological influences on youth behavior. While technological readiness varies among participants, most rely on conventional, face-to-face interaction, reflecting the limited integration of digital tools in rural nonformal education contexts. This diversity provides important insight into how adult learners negotiate pedagogical practices within constrained yet dynamic environments.

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted directly at the research site to capture natural behaviors, interactions, and participation patterns in religious activities, such as congregational prayers and Qur'anic recitation, as forms of experiential learning. Interviews were carried out with adolescents, educators, and community leaders to explore their experiences, reflections, and adaptive strategies in strengthening religious character, thereby highlighting processes of meaning-making and self-directed learning. Documentation, including institutional records, community archives, and relevant village documents, was analyzed to provide contextual and historical support for the findings.

To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher applied triangulation techniques as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and further elaborated by Patton (2015). Triangulation was achieved by comparing observational data with interview results, cross-checking statements made by different informants in both public and private contexts, and contrasting interview data with relevant documents. This process enhanced the credibility of the findings by reducing potential bias and confirming the consistency of information across sources.

In addition, the research instruments particularly observation and interview guides were designed to capture essential elements of adult learning. The interview protocol included open-ended and reflective questions aimed at exploring participants' lived experiences, personal interpretations, and intrinsic motivations in engaging with religious activities. Specific attention was given to how teachers and community religious facilitators reflect on their practices, adapt strategies based on experience, and construct meaning from their interactions with adolescents. Similarly, the observation guide focused not only on visible behaviors but also on patterns of participation, engagement, and experiential learning processes occurring within community-based religious activities. This design ensured that the data collection process captured reflective thinking, experiential knowledge, and self-directed aspects of learning among participants.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data collection, information was gathered using the aforementioned techniques. Data reduction involved filtering, categorizing, and focusing on data relevant to both character formation and adult learning processes, including themes such as reflection, experience, and motivation. Data display was conducted by organizing the data into coherent narratives and thematic patterns that illustrate how learning occurs within nonformal settings. Finally, conclusions were drawn through iterative reflection, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' experiences and aligned with the study's objectives. Through this process, the research generated comprehensive insights into how teachers and community leaders, as adult learners, develop and implement strategies to reinforce adolescents' religious character through community-based religious activities.

DISCUSSION

Strategies of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Strengthening Religious Character through Religious Activities

The findings indicate that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers employ various strategies to strengthen adolescents' religious character in the village; however, more importantly, these strategies function as nonformal learning processes through which both adolescents and community religious facilitators engage in experiential and reflective learning.

First, the development of routine religious practices such as reciting prayers before activities, tadarus (Qur'anic recitation), congregational Dzuhur prayers, and the habituation of greetings serves as a form of experiential learning. Adolescents learn not only through instruction but through repeated participation in meaningful religious activities embedded in daily life. Teachers, in turn, reflect on the effectiveness of these routines and continuously adjust their approaches based on adolescents' responses, indicating a process of reflective practice. While many adolescents participate voluntarily, inconsistencies among some participants highlight the ongoing need for reinforcement and adaptation.

Second, the creation of a religious environment within the village through facilities such as musholla, visual reminders (Islamic posters), and the enforcement of religious norms functions as a situated learning space. In this environment, learning occurs socially, where adolescents internalize values through observation, interaction, and community expectations. Teachers and community leaders act as adult learners who interpret environmental challenges such as weak religious culture at home and develop context-sensitive strategies, including intensified mentoring and religious event-based learning.

Third, spontaneous religious education, such as immediate advice or correction when adolescents make mistakes, reflects micro-level reflective learning moments. These interactions allow adolescents to directly connect actions with values, while teachers simultaneously engage in on-the-spot pedagogical decision-making, adjusting tone and approach (e.g., shifting from public correction to more personal guidance) based on prior experiences. This demonstrates an ongoing cycle of action and reflection characteristic of adult learning.

Fourth, the creation of religious situations such as collective worship, Qur'anic recitation before activities, and Islamic holiday commemorations represents integrated experiential learning cycles, where adolescents move from participation to internalization and eventually to practice in daily life. Teachers emphasize not only the performance of rituals but also their meaning, encouraging deeper reflection and value formation.

In addition to these strategies, specific programs such as muhadharah, tahfidz al-Qur'an, Safari Jumat, and Qur'anic literacy initiatives provide structured opportunities for active engagement and skill development. Variations in adolescents' Qur'anic reading abilities

and worship practices illustrate different stages of learning, requiring teachers to adapt their strategies continuously. This adaptive process reflects self-directed learning among educators, as they respond to learners' diverse needs without relying on rigid instructional frameworks.

To support sustainability, evaluation practices such as monitoring attendance in congregational prayers are not merely administrative but function as feedback mechanisms that inform reflective improvement. Teachers use these insights to refine their approaches, including adopting more persuasive and individualized strategies, particularly in addressing sensitive issues such as consistency in wearing the hijab.

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening adolescents' religious character in village contexts is not solely the result of structured programs, but of ongoing, experience-based, and reflective learning processes involving both adolescents and educators. Teachers act as lifelong learners who continuously construct, evaluate, and adapt their strategies through interaction, reflection, and community engagement. While digital tools such as AI are not yet widely integrated in this rural context, the findings highlight potential opportunities for supporting reflective practice and pedagogical innovation in future nonformal education settings.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Strengthening Religious Character

Supporting factors in strengthening adolescents' religious character in the village are reflected in the collaborative engagement of teachers, community leaders, and families, as well as the availability of facilities such as the village mosque, which serves as a central space for nonformal religious learning. Adolescents' relatively high enthusiasm for participating in religious programs facilitates engagement in experiential learning processes. However, challenges persist, including inconsistent discipline in performing congregational prayers and varying levels of Qur'anic literacy. External influences, particularly from family environments that do not consistently model religious practices, also affect adolescents' engagement. These conditions require educators not only to guide behavior but also to foster deeper awareness and personal commitment among adolescents.

From a transformative learning perspective, the internalization of religious values occurs through four interconnected dimensions: teacher strategies, adolescents' active participation, environmental support, and observable impacts on character development. Teacher strategies such as routine habituation, the creation of religious environments, spontaneous guidance, and structured religious programs serve as triggers for reflective engagement, where adolescents begin to question, understand, and gradually internalize the meaning behind religious practices. Adolescents' active participation in these activities contributes not only to behavioral compliance but also to the development of critical awareness, as they increasingly recognize the relevance of religious values in their daily lives and social interactions.

Importantly, the learning process observed in this study indicates elements of mindset transformation among both adolescents and educators. Some adolescents demonstrate a shift from externally driven participation (e.g., complying with rules) toward more internally motivated religious practices, such as voluntarily engaging in prayer and improving Qur'anic recitation. This shift reflects a movement from habitual action to conscious and meaningful practice. At the same time, teachers and community religious facilitators exhibit professional and personal growth as adult learners, continuously reflecting on their strategies, adapting to challenges, and developing more empathetic and context-sensitive approaches in guiding adolescents. For example, the transition from direct public correction to more personalized and persuasive guidance indicates an increased awareness of learners' emotional and social needs.

Efforts to shape religious character in the village thus extend beyond cognitive instruction and behavioral enforcement, encompassing transformative processes that integrate reflection, experience, and value internalization. Internal supporting factors include adolescents' intrinsic motivation to improve themselves, while external factors involve family influence, peer interaction, community environment, and exposure to broader social and technological changes. Families that consistently model religious practices tend to foster adolescents with stronger internal commitment, whereas less supportive environments require educators to play a more transformative role in reshaping perspectives and behaviors.

The findings suggest that strengthening adolescents' religious character in nonformal village contexts involves not only habituation and social reinforcement but also transformative learning processes, where both adolescents and educators experience shifts in understanding, awareness, and practice. These processes highlight the importance of reflection, dialogue, and adaptive learning in fostering sustainable moral and religious development.

Furthermore, teachers in the village play a vital role not only as instructors but also as facilitators of learning and role models within a nonformal educational context. From an adult education perspective, their role reflects principles of experiential learning, where both adolescents and educators engage in learning through direct participation in religious practices such as congregational prayer, *tadarus*, and religious programs. These activities function as lived learning experiences through which values are not merely transmitted but constructed through repeated engagement. However, challenges such as inconsistent supervision and limited parental involvement indicate that experiential learning requires continuous reinforcement and supportive environments to be effective.

In addition, the findings reveal the importance of reflective learning processes among teachers and community religious facilitators. Educators demonstrate adaptive strategies such as shifting from public correction to more personalized guidance which indicate ongoing reflection on their teaching practices. This aligns with the notion that adult

learners continuously evaluate and refine their approaches based on prior experiences and contextual challenges. Such reflective practices enable teachers to respond more sensitively to adolescents' emotional and social needs, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of religious character formation.

Peer influence, as identified in this study, also contributes to learning as a social and participatory process, where adolescents construct meaning through interaction with their peers. Positive peer relationships reinforce religious practices and values, while negative influences may hinder them. This dynamic reflects the importance of situated and collaborative learning within nonformal education settings, where learning is shaped by social context and group interaction rather than individual instruction alone.

Technology, meanwhile, presents both opportunities and challenges within the framework of self-directed learning. Access to digital religious content allows adolescents to independently explore and deepen their understanding of religious teachings, supporting autonomous learning beyond structured activities. However, without adequate guidance, technology may also expose adolescents to conflicting values. This highlights the need for educators, as adult learners, to develop digital awareness and guide adolescents in critically engaging with online content as part of their lifelong learning process.

The formation of adolescents' religious character in the village is thus shaped by interconnected internal and external factors, including teacher strategies, parental support, peer influence, and the use of technology. These factors collectively create a learning ecosystem where experiential, reflective, and self-directed learning processes occur simultaneously. Consistent habituation and role modeling serve as entry points for experience-based learning, while reflection and social interaction deepen value internalization.

The findings of this study align with national trends in character education in Indonesia, particularly the Strengthening Character Education (SCE) program, which emphasizes embedding moral and spiritual values into daily life (Susilo, Dewantoro, & Yuningsih, 2022). However, this study extends prior research by demonstrating that in nonformal village contexts, character education is not only a structured program but also a lifelong learning process shaped by experience, reflection, and community interaction. The observed strategies routine practices, role modeling, and environmental design function as mechanisms for experiential learning, while continuous adaptation by educators reflects reflective learning in action.

Moreover, the role of peer influence identified in this study is consistent with findings by Shen, DeLay, Purwono et al. (2023), which highlight the importance of peer relationships in shaping adolescents' religiosity. Similarly, Rohman, Arisanti, and Mansur (2024) emphasize the role of social Islamic values in deepening religious character. This study contributes further by showing that these influences operate within a nonformal learning framework,

where adolescents actively construct meaning through interaction, participation, and self-directed engagement. This study underscores that strengthening adolescents' religious character in village contexts is not merely a matter of implementing religious programs, but involves fostering adult learning processes among educators and adolescents alike. By integrating experiential, reflective, and self-directed learning, nonformal education in rural communities can serve as a powerful medium for sustainable moral and religious development.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that strengthening adolescents' religious character in village contexts is not the result of a single intervention, but emerges from the synergy of multiple community-based strategies, including routine habituation, the creation of a religious environment, spontaneous religious guidance, and structured religious programs. More importantly, these strategies function as **nonformal learning processes** in which adolescents develop religious values through continuous participation, social interaction, and lived experience. From a nonformal and lifelong learning perspective, the findings reveal that religious character formation is sustained through **experiential, reflective, and socially embedded learning practices** rather than formal instruction alone. Adolescents internalize values such as discipline, honesty, mutual respect, and responsibility not merely through compliance with rules, but through repeated engagement in meaningful religious activities that gradually shape their attitudes and behaviors.

A key contribution of this study lies in highlighting the role of teachers and community religious facilitators as **adult learners**. They are not passive implementers of predefined programs but active agents who continuously adapt their strategies based on experience, reflect on challenges in the field, and respond to the diverse needs of adolescents. This ongoing process of adaptation and reflection reflects principles of lifelong learning, where educators develop professionally through practice-based knowledge and contextual problem-solving.

Furthermore, the study shows that the effectiveness of religious character development depends on the interaction between internal and external factors. Supportive family environments, community engagement, and positive peer relationships enhance learning processes, while inconsistent discipline and external social influences pose challenges. These findings emphasize that nonformal education in village settings operates as a **collaborative learning ecosystem**, requiring sustained synergy among multiple stakeholders. This research contributes to the field of nonformal education by demonstrating that religious character formation in rural communities is best understood as a **lifelong, experience-based learning process** involving both adolescents and educators. It underscores the importance of empowering teachers as reflective practitioners and adult

learners, and highlights the need to design community-based educational practices that are participatory, adaptive, and grounded in local cultural contexts.

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