

Transforming Character Education Through Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah-Based Innovative Learning

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ABSTRACT

Character education has become an important concern in contemporary education due to increasing social, cultural, and technological changes that require schools to develop students' moral, social, and spiritual competencies. Islamic educational institutions have a strategic role in addressing this challenge by integrating religious values with innovative pedagogical approaches. This study aims to analyse the transformation of character education through Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah (AIK)-based innovative learning at MI Muhammadiyah 1 Kota Probolinggo, Indonesia. This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how Islamic values are integrated into learning practices and contribute to students' character development. The research was conducted from April to May 2025, involving 36 participants consisting of six teachers and thirty sixth-grade students. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to AIK value integration, innovative learning practices, teacher roles, and character transformation. The findings reveal that AIK-based innovative learning transforms character education through three interconnected processes: the internalisation of Islamic values, the implementation of student-centred innovative pedagogy, and continuous character habituation within the school environment. The study demonstrates that AIK values, including religiosity, honesty, responsibility, discipline, respect, cooperation, and social concern, are not merely transmitted as religious knowledge but are embedded within meaningful learning experiences through collaboration, contextual problem-solving, reflective activities, and teacher modelling. This study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by positioning AIK-based innovative learning as a transformative pedagogical framework that integrates religious values, contemporary learning approaches, and holistic character development. The findings provide practical implications for Islamic elementary schools in designing value-based learning models to strengthen students' moral, social, and spiritual competencies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a critical global agenda as educational institutions face increasingly complex social, cultural, and technological challenges in the twenty-first century. Rapid globalization, digital transformation, and changing social structures have generated concerns regarding moral responsibility, social cohesion, and young people's capacity to demonstrate ethical decision-making. Contemporary educational discourse emphasizes that schools should not only focus on academic achievement but also cultivate students' moral, civic, intellectual, and performance character dimensions. Character education is increasingly understood as a comprehensive educational process involving curriculum, school culture, teacher modelling, and students' lived experiences rather than merely the transmission of moral concepts (McGrath et al., 2021). Furthermore, recent evidence indicates that effective character education programs require systematic implementation strategies that connect educational goals, learning environments, and measurable character outcomes (Brown et al., 2023). Therefore, transforming character education requires innovative pedagogical approaches capable of integrating values into meaningful learning experiences, particularly approaches that recognize students as holistic human beings with intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions.

Previous studies across various countries have demonstrated that value-based education and innovative pedagogical practices significantly contribute to students' character development. Research in moral and character education highlights that character formation occurs more effectively when students actively engage with values through reflection, practice, and social interaction rather than passively receiving ethical instructions (Berkowitz, 2022). International scholarship also shows that teachers play a central role in transforming character education because their pedagogical practices, professional ethics, and personal modelling influence how students understand and internalize values (Nygren & McDermott, 2021). In religious education contexts, values derived from religious traditions have been recognized as important resources for developing students' moral identity and social responsibility. Islamic education, in particular, emphasizes the integration of knowledge, spirituality, and ethical action, providing a holistic foundation for character formation. Within Indonesian Muhammadiyah educational institutions, Al-Islam and Kemuhimmadiyah (AIK) represents a distinctive educational framework that combines Islamic values, intellectual development, and social engagement. However, previous studies on Islamic education have largely examined religious curriculum implementation and institutional identity, while limited attention has been directed toward understanding AIK as an innovative pedagogical framework for transforming character education.

Despite the growing interest in character education and value-based learning, significant research gaps remain. First, many existing studies conceptualize character education primarily as a program or curriculum component rather than examining the processes through which values are transformed into students' dispositions and behaviors. Although meta-analytic evidence confirms the effectiveness of character education programs, further investigation is required to understand the mechanisms that enable values to become internalized through educational practices (Brown et al., 2023). Second, research on religious education has frequently focused on theological transmission and moral instruction, while the role of innovative learning approaches in strengthening students' character development remains insufficiently explored. Third, within the Indonesian context, Muhammadiyah educational institutions possess a unique tradition of integrating Islamic values and modern educational practices, yet their contribution to international discussions on transformative character education remains underrepresented. Consequently, there is a need for empirical research that explains how Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah values are operationalized through innovative learning strategies to respond to contemporary challenges in character education.

This study offers a novel contribution by conceptualizing Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah-based innovative learning as a transformative approach to character education. Rather than viewing AIK merely as religious content delivered through classroom instruction, this research positions AIK as a pedagogical framework that shapes learning processes, teacher practices, student engagement, and value internalization. The operational novelty of this study lies in examining how AIK values are translated into innovative learning practices through reflective activities, contextual learning, collaborative experiences, and teacher modelling. This perspective extends previous character education research by demonstrating how religious values can function as active pedagogical resources for developing students' moral awareness, social responsibility, and personal integrity. By bringing the Muhammadiyah educational experience into global academic discourse, this study contributes to broader discussions on how culturally and religiously grounded educational models can enrich contemporary approaches to transformative character education.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah-based innovative learning transforms character education. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following research question: How does Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah-based innovative learning transform students' character education? By addressing this question, the study intends to provide theoretical and practical contributions to Islamic education research, particularly in developing innovative approaches that integrate religious values, pedagogical transformation, and

holistic character development. The findings are expected to offer insights for Islamic schools, madrasahs, and educational policymakers seeking to strengthen character education through culturally meaningful and pedagogically innovative approaches.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine the transformation of character education through Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah (AIK)-based innovative learning at MI Muhammadiyah 1 Kota Probolinggo, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to explore educational processes, experiences, meanings, and contextual practices related to character formation rather than measuring causal relationships among variables. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for investigating complex educational phenomena because it enables researchers to understand how participants interpret experiences within specific social and cultural contexts (Busetto et al., 2020). Furthermore, a case study design was applied because the research focused on understanding a contemporary educational practice within its natural setting, namely the implementation of AIK-based innovative learning in a Muhammadiyah Islamic elementary school (Ridder, 2020). The research was conducted over a two-month period from April to May 2025, encompassing research preparation, participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings. Through this approach, the study sought to reveal how Islamic values are integrated into learning practices and how these practices contribute to students' character development.

The research was conducted at MI Muhammadiyah 1 Kota Probolinggo, East Java, Indonesia, which was purposively selected as the research site because the school represents a Muhammadiyah Islamic elementary education institution that systematically implements Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah values within its educational activities. The selection of this setting was based on the consideration that Muhammadiyah schools provide a distinctive educational environment where Islamic values, modern pedagogy, and character education are integrated into daily learning practices. Context-based educational research emphasises that understanding educational innovation requires examining practices within their institutional, cultural, and social environments rather than separating them from their contexts (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Therefore, MI Muhammadiyah 1 Kota Probolinggo was considered an appropriate research site for exploring the transformation of character education through AIK-based innovative learning.

The participants of this study consisted of teachers and sixth-grade students who were directly involved in AIK-based learning activities. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because qualitative studies require participants who possess relevant experiences and

can provide meaningful information related to the research objectives (Campbell et al., 2020). The participants included six teachers and thirty sixth-grade students, resulting in a total of thirty-six participants. Sixth-grade students were selected because they had experienced AIK-based educational practices throughout their elementary education period, allowing them to provide reflective perspectives regarding changes in religious awareness, responsibility, discipline, cooperation, and moral behaviour. Teachers were selected because they played an essential role as curriculum implementers and learning facilitators who translated AIK values into classroom practices.

The object of this research was the process of transforming character education through Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah-based innovative learning. The study specifically examined three interconnected dimensions: (1) the integration of AIK values into learning activities, (2) innovative pedagogical practices implemented by teachers, and (3) students' character development as reflected in their attitudes, behaviours, and social interactions. The use of multiple perspectives from teachers and students enabled the researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of how character transformation occurs through educational practices.

Data were collected during April 2025 through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. Observation was conducted to identify patterns of AIK implementation, teacher–student interaction, and students' behavioural expressions during learning activities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students to explore their experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding AIK-based innovative learning. Questionnaires were used as supporting instruments to obtain students' reflections concerning character development indicators. The combination of different data sources was intended to strengthen research credibility through triangulation, which is widely recognised as an important strategy for improving trustworthiness in qualitative educational research (Flick, 2022).

The research instruments consisted of observation guidelines, semi-structured interview protocols, and questionnaire items developed based on the dimensions of AIK values, innovative learning practices, and character education indicators. Before implementation, the instruments were reviewed to ensure alignment with the research objectives and clarity of interpretation. The research procedures consisted of several stages: preliminary preparation and research access (April 2025), participant identification and ethical procedures (April 2025), classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaire distribution (April–May 2025), data organisation and transcription, thematic coding, interpretation of findings, and preparation of the research report (May 2025).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to AIK integration and character transformation. The analysis followed the stages of familiarisation,

coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021). The qualitative data analysis process was assisted using NVivo 14 software to organise transcripts, observation notes, questionnaire responses, and emerging themes systematically. The credibility of findings was ensured through source triangulation, member checking, and peer discussion. This analytical procedure enabled the researchers to construct an interpretive explanation of how Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah-based innovative learning contributes to transforming character education in Islamic elementary education.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Result

The findings of this study reveal that the transformation of character education through Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah (AIK)-based innovative learning occurs through a continuous process of integrating Islamic values, innovative pedagogical practices, and students' behavioral development. The thematic analysis of research data identified that AIK-based learning does not function merely as an additional religious subject but as an educational framework that shapes students' attitudes, interactions, and moral awareness. The transformation process appears through the connection between religious understanding and daily practices, where Islamic values are translated into concrete learning experiences. The implementation of AIK principles encourages students to understand that character formation is not separated from academic learning but becomes an essential dimension of the educational process.

The first emerging theme concerns the internalization of Islamic values through classroom learning and school culture. The findings indicate that teachers actively integrate AIK values, including religiosity, honesty, responsibility, discipline, respect, cooperation, and social awareness, into learning activities. These values are introduced through learning materials, teacher modelling, classroom interactions, and habituation programs. The students' experiences demonstrate that character education becomes more meaningful when values are repeatedly practiced in authentic situations rather than only explained theoretically. Through this process, students develop an understanding that Islamic teachings are closely related to their responsibilities toward themselves, others, and the surrounding environment.

The second theme highlights the role of innovative learning strategies in strengthening character transformation. The findings show that teachers implement student-centered learning approaches that involve discussion, collaboration, contextual problem-solving, and reflective activities. These approaches provide opportunities for students to actively construct

meaning from Islamic values and apply them in different contexts. The learning process encourages students to participate, express opinions, work collaboratively, and reflect on their behavior. Consequently, innovative AIK-based learning creates a learning environment where character development emerges through interaction, experience, and reflection rather than through memorization of moral concepts alone.

The third theme relates to the transformation of students' character dispositions as a consequence of sustained AIK integration. The findings indicate observable changes in students' behavioral patterns, particularly in religious commitment, responsibility, independence, empathy, and cooperation. Students demonstrate greater awareness of appropriate behavior in classroom and social contexts, reflecting the influence of continuous value-based learning experiences. Teachers also perceive that students gradually develop stronger self-regulation and social sensitivity when Islamic values are consistently embedded in daily educational practices. These findings suggest that character transformation is a gradual process shaped by consistent interaction between curriculum content, teacher practices, and school culture.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that teachers serve as important agents in translating AIK values into transformative learning experiences. Teachers do not only act as transmitters of religious knowledge but also function as role models who demonstrate ethical behavior and create meaningful learning environments. The effectiveness of AIK-based innovative learning is closely associated with teachers' ability to connect Islamic principles with students' developmental needs and contemporary educational challenges. Through reflective teaching practices, teachers facilitate students in understanding the relevance of Islamic values within their personal, academic, and social lives. This finding highlights that character education transformation depends not only on the existence of value-based curricula but also on the pedagogical competence and commitment of educators.

Overall, the results demonstrate that Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah-based innovative learning contributes to transforming character education through three interconnected mechanisms: value internalization, innovative pedagogical implementation, and continuous behavioral habituation. The findings position AIK-based learning as a contextual educational model that integrates religious values with contemporary approaches to primary education. Rather than viewing character education as a separate instructional objective, the study shows that AIK-based innovative learning enables character formation to become an integral part of students' everyday educational experiences. This transformation

provides evidence that Islamic value-based pedagogy can contribute to the development of holistic character education within Muhammadiyah elementary schools.

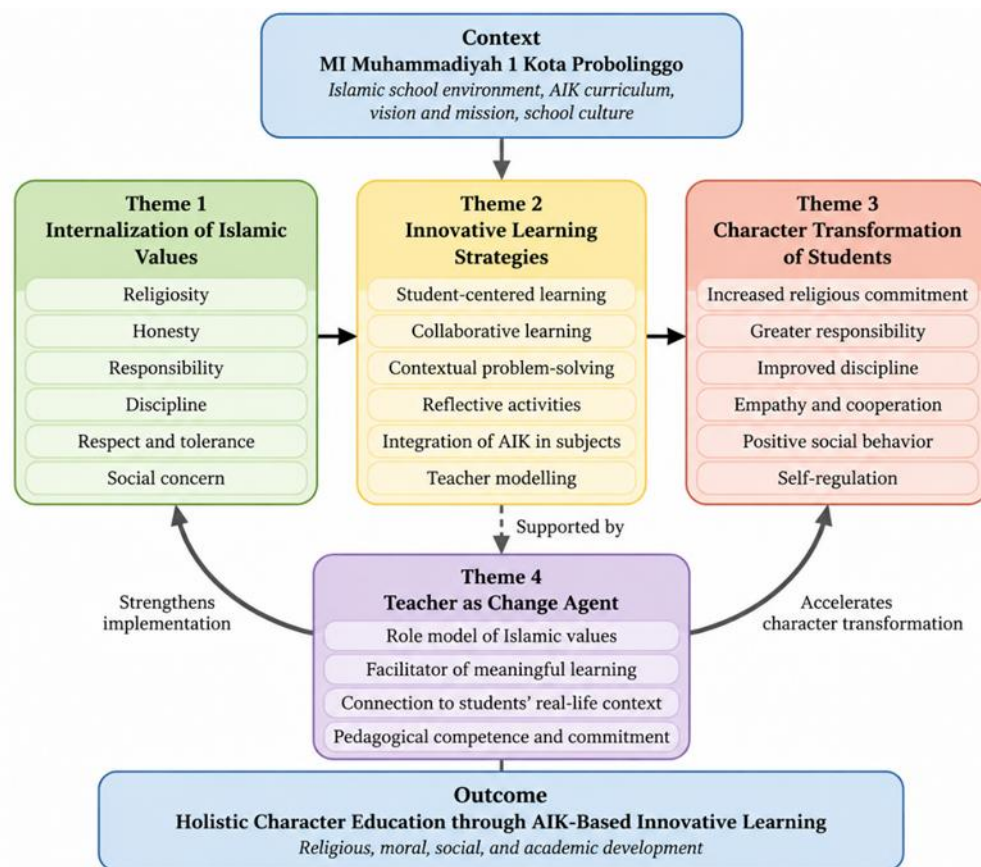


Figure 1. Thematic Relationship of the Findings

3.2. Discussion

The findings illustrated in Figure 1 demonstrate that the transformation of character education through Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah (AIK)-based innovative learning represents a dynamic educational process involving the interaction between Islamic value internalization, innovative pedagogical practices, teacher agency, and students' holistic character development. The thematic relationship indicates that character transformation does not occur as a direct consequence of religious instruction alone, but emerges through a continuous process in which values are embedded within learning experiences, classroom interactions, and school culture. This finding extends contemporary perspectives on character education, which argue that character development requires systematic integration between moral values, educational environments, and students' lived experiences rather than isolated teaching of ethical concepts (Berkowitz, 2021). Therefore, the AIK-based learning model identified in this study can be interpreted as a transformative pedagogy that connects religious values with everyday educational practices.

The first important finding from Figure 1 is the central role of Islamic value internalization as the foundation of character transformation. The themes of religiosity, honesty, responsibility, discipline, respect, and social concern demonstrate that AIK functions not only as curriculum content but also as a framework for shaping students' moral dispositions. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing that effective character education occurs when values are experienced, practiced, and reflected upon continuously within authentic social contexts (McGrath et al., 2021). However, unlike conventional character education models that often separate moral instruction from academic learning, the AIK-based approach identified in this study integrates values into the learning process itself. This suggests that Islamic values become transformative when they are translated into behavioral practices and meaningful interactions rather than remaining at the level of theoretical understanding.

The second contribution of this study concerns the relationship between innovative learning strategies and character formation. Figure 1 shows that student-centered learning, collaborative learning, contextual problem-solving, reflective activities, and AIK integration across subjects operate as mechanisms that strengthen character development. This finding supports previous studies showing that active and participatory learning approaches provide greater opportunities for students to construct moral understanding through experience and reflection (Hoggan, 2020). Nevertheless, this study provides a different perspective by demonstrating that innovation in Islamic education is not limited to the use of technology or instructional variation but also involves transforming how values are experienced during learning. In this sense, AIK-based innovative learning expands the meaning of pedagogical innovation by incorporating spiritual and ethical dimensions into contemporary educational practices.

Furthermore, Figure 1 highlights the strategic position of teachers as change agents in transforming character education. Teachers function not only as knowledge transmitters but also as moral models, learning facilitators, and interpreters of Islamic values within classroom contexts. This finding aligns with research indicating that teacher beliefs, professional identity, and modelling behavior significantly influence the effectiveness of character education implementation (Nygreen & McDermott, 2021). The present study extends this perspective by showing that in Muhammadiyah educational settings, teachers become mediators between institutional Islamic values and students' personal character development. Consequently, the success of AIK-based innovative learning depends not only on curriculum design but also on teachers' capacity to contextualize Islamic principles into meaningful educational experiences.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of character education literature by proposing an integrated framework that connects religious values, innovative pedagogy, and holistic character formation. Previous research has frequently examined character education from either moral development perspectives or curriculum implementation perspectives; however, limited attention has been given to how faith-based educational systems transform values into innovative learning mechanisms. The findings from MI Muhammadiyah 1 Kota Probolinggo provide evidence that Islamic character education can be positioned within broader international discussions on holistic education by demonstrating that spiritual, moral, social, and academic dimensions can be developed simultaneously.

Practically, this study suggests that Islamic elementary schools should move beyond viewing AIK as a separate religious subject and instead develop it as an integrated pedagogical approach across learning activities. Schools can strengthen character education by supporting teachers' pedagogical competence, designing reflective learning experiences, and creating school cultures that consistently reinforce Islamic values. The findings also provide implications for educational policymakers and Muhammadiyah institutions by demonstrating the potential of AIK-based innovative learning as a contextual model for strengthening character education in contemporary Islamic schools. Thus, this research highlights that transforming character education requires not only the presence of moral values but also innovative educational practices that enable students to understand, experience, and embody those values in their daily lives.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Al-Islam and Kemuhammadiyah (AIK)-based innovative learning provides a transformative framework for character education in Muhammadiyah Islamic elementary schools. The findings demonstrate that character transformation does not occur merely through the transmission of religious knowledge, but through a continuous process of integrating Islamic values, innovative pedagogical practices, and students' daily experiences. AIK functions not only as curricular content but also as an educational foundation that shapes students' religiosity, honesty, responsibility, discipline, respect, cooperation, and social awareness. The novelty of this study lies in positioning AIK-based learning as a transformative pedagogical model that connects Islamic values with contemporary learning approaches through value internalisation, reflective activities, collaborative learning, contextual problem-solving, and teacher modelling. This perspective extends previous character education studies by showing that religious values can operate as active pedagogical resources for developing students' moral,

social, and personal competencies.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of character education and Islamic education scholarship by demonstrating that effective character formation requires the integration of institutional values, pedagogical innovation, and supportive learning environments. Practically, the findings suggest that Islamic elementary schools should strengthen AIK implementation by developing teachers' pedagogical competence, integrating Islamic values across learning activities, and creating school cultures that consistently reinforce character development. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its qualitative case study design conducted within a single Muhammadiyah elementary school context, which restricts broader generalisation of the findings. Future research is therefore recommended to examine AIK-based innovative learning across diverse Islamic educational institutions using comparative and mixed-method approaches to further validate the model and explore its applicability in wider educational contexts.

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