

RESEARCH

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A Character-Based Learning Model to Foster Independence in Early Childhood Islamic Education

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Abstract

This study examines the development and implementation of a character-based learning model designed to foster independence among early childhood learners in Islamic educational settings — specifically Raudhatul Athfal (RA) and PAUD Islam. Grounded in Islamic moral values of amanah (trustworthiness), mas'uliyah (responsibility), and ta'awun (cooperation), the model integrates structured lesson plans, Islamic narrative big books, and character-themed nasyid (Islamic songs) into daily classroom practice. Employing a Research and Development (R&D) approach based on the Borg and Gall model (2007), the study was conducted with 10 early childhood educators and their students aged 4–6 years across institutions in Tangerang and Sawangan, Indonesia. Pre- and post-intervention data revealed a significant increase in children's independent behaviors from 37% to 83%, alongside substantial growth in teacher instructional competence and confidence in delivering character-integrated Islamic education. The model demonstrates strong scalability and cultural resonance within Indonesia's Islamic early childhood education system, contributing a pedagogically robust and spiritually grounded framework for character education aligned with national curriculum mandates and Islamic values.

Keywords: character education; Islamic early childhood education; independence; Raudhatul Athfal; teacher professional development

Introduction

Independence the capacity to initiate purposeful action, make responsible decisions, and complete tasks without undue reliance on external direction is widely recognized as a fundamental developmental milestone in early childhood and a critical prerequisite for lifelong learning. In early childhood education, fostering independence is not merely a pedagogical objective; it is a moral and social imperative tied to children's holistic development across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Berk & Meyers, 2020). The urgency of this goal is particularly pronounced in Islamic educational philosophy, where the concept of istiqlaliyyah self-sufficiency rooted in personal responsibility before Allah occupies a central position in the formation of young Muslim character (Al-Attas, 1993; Langgulong, 2002).

Data from early childhood education in Indonesia reveal a concerning gap between policy intent and classroom reality. According to the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS, 2022), approximately 13.57 million children (66.2% of the early childhood-age population) were enrolled in some

form of PAUD in 2021–2022; yet surveys conducted by UNICEF Indonesia (2020) found that only 42% of early childhood educators reported feeling adequately prepared to deliver intentional character education. A study by Hapsari et al. (2022) found that character education in more than 60% of sampled PAUD institutions was implemented in an ad hoc, unsystematic manner, lacking structured curriculum integration. This gap is even more pronounced in Islamic early childhood settings: a national mapping conducted by Kemenag (2021) identified that fewer than 30% of RA (Raudhatul Athfal) institutions had developed structured character education programs aligned with the Islamic curriculum framework, despite the Ministry's explicit mandate for *akhlakul karimah* (noble moral character) as a primary educational goal.

The Indonesian government has responded to this challenge through a series of policy frameworks. The Strengthening Character Education (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter/PPK) program, launched through Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017, mandates the integration of five core character values religiosity, nationalism, independence, mutual cooperation, and integrity into all levels of education including PAUD. The Merdeka Belajar curriculum framework (Kemendikbudristek, 2022) further reinforces this mandate, positioning *karakter* (character) and *profil pelajar Pancasila* as the overarching goals of Indonesian education from the earliest years. At the Islamic education level, Kemenag's Kurikulum RA (2020) explicitly identifies *akhlakul karimah* formation as inseparable from cognitive and physical development, underscoring the unique character education mandate of Islamic early childhood institutions.

Global educational discourse strongly supports this direction. The UNESCO (2020) Education for Sustainable Development framework advocates for values-based education beginning in early childhood, specifically citing autonomy, responsibility, and cooperation as foundational competencies for sustainable societies. A longitudinal study by Jones et al. (2015) published in the *American Journal of Public Health* followed over 750 children from kindergarten to age 25 and found that kindergarten social-emotional competencies including independence and self-regulation were significant predictors of educational attainment, employment, and mental health in adulthood. Durlak et al. (2011), in a meta-analysis of 213 social-emotional learning programs involving more than 270,000 students, found that well-implemented programs produced an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement and a 23-percentage-point decrease in behavioral problems. These findings underscore the developmental and societal significance of early character education.

Within Islamic education research, Yusuf (2018) demonstrated that Islamic character values particularly *amanah* and *mas'uliyah* when systematically integrated into early childhood curricula in Malaysian Islamic preschools, produced significantly higher scores on behavioral independence and moral reasoning measures compared to conventional preschool programs. Similarly, Zulkifli et al. (2019) found that Islamic narrative-based instruction in Indonesian RA institutions improved children's prosocial behaviors and self-regulation. However, both studies noted the absence of comprehensive, structured pedagogical models that teachers could adopt and adapt a gap directly addressed by the present research.

Theoretically, the character-based learning model developed in this study is grounded in converging frameworks. Lickona (1991; 2019) defines effective character education as the deliberate cultivation of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behavior a triadic structure that parallels the Islamic *'ilm* (knowledge), *iman* (faith), and *'amal* (righteous action) framework. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory provides the pedagogical mechanism: values are internalized through scaffolded social interaction, guided by the *murabbi* (teacher-guide) who mediates between the child's current capacity and their developmental potential.

Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory highlights observational learning and modeling as primary pathways through which young children acquire character dispositions, an insight reinforced by the Islamic concept of *uswah hasanah* (exemplary modeling). Montessori's (2004) emphasis on prepared environments that honor children's autonomy and self-directed engagement provides a complementary practical framework resonating with Islamic pedagogical respect for the child's *fitrah* (innate moral nature).

In the Indonesian context, research on Islamic character education in early childhood settings has gained momentum in recent years. Mulyasa (2021) argues that the integration of Islamic values into PAUD pedagogy requires a systemic approach: one that engages not only the curriculum but also teacher competence, learning materials, and the school culture. Rachmawati and Kurniati (2020) found that multimodal approaches combining storytelling, music, and cooperative play were most effective in fostering moral internalization in young children in Indonesian PAUD settings. Fauziddin and Mufarizuddin (2018) specifically documented the effectiveness of Islamic-themed storytelling in promoting prosocial and autonomous behaviors in RA institutions. Yet a validated, replicable model that systematically integrates all these elements structured lesson planning, Islamic narrative media, music, and teacher development has remained elusive in the Indonesian Islamic early childhood education literature.

This study addresses that gap directly. It presents the development, implementation, and evaluation of a character-based learning model specifically designed for Islamic early childhood education settings in Indonesia. The model integrates Islamic narrative big books, character-themed *nasyid*, and structured RPPH (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran Harian*) into a cohesive pedagogical framework grounded in Islamic moral values and child development principles. Through a Research and Development (R&D) process with 10 educators and their students aged 4–6 years in RA and PAUD Islam institutions across Tangerang and Sawangan, the study evaluates the model's impact on children's independence and on teacher professional competence. The expected contribution is a validated, scalable, and culturally resonant tool for Islamic character education in the critical early years of Muslim children's development.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a Research and Development (R&D) approach following the Borg and Gall (2007) model, which involves systematic cycles of need analysis, product design, expert validation, iterative field testing, and revision. This approach was selected because it allows empirical evaluation and refinement of the character-based learning model within authentic early childhood Islamic education settings, ensuring both theoretical soundness and practical applicability. The research proceeded in two major phases: (1) preliminary research and product design, encompassing needs assessment, literature synthesis, model development, and expert validation; and (2) limited and expanded field trials with systematic observation, data collection, analysis, and model revision.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in RA (*Raudhatul Athfal*) and PAUD Islam institutions in Tangerang and Sawangan, West Java, Indonesia regions selected for their active Islamic early childhood education communities and educators' willingness to engage in participatory curriculum development. Ten early childhood educators and their respective student groups (children aged 4–6 years) participated in the research. Teachers were purposively selected based on their active roles in Islamic character education initiatives and commitment to professional development. Children's

participation was conducted under informed parental consent following institutional ethical protocols.

The Character-Based Learning Model

The model comprised four integrated components:

- 1) Structured Islamic Lesson Plans (RPPH): Designed to embed character values amanah, mas'uliyah, and ta'awun into daily thematic activities, circle time, and guided play, aligned with Kemenag's RA Curriculum Framework (2020).
- 2) Islamic Narrative Big Books: Story books featuring Muslim child protagonists navigating moral dilemmas related to independence and responsibility, incorporating Quranic references and Islamic moral principles.
- 3) Character-Themed Nasyyid: Islamic songs designed to reinforce values through rhythm, repetition, and movement, making abstract values concrete and memorable.
- 4) Teacher Implementation Guides: Providing facilitation notes, Islamic moral reasoning prompts, and formative assessment tools aligned with Islamic developmental goals.

Materials were developed through an iterative process involving literature review, expert consultation with Islamic early childhood education specialists from partner UIN institutions, and practitioner feedback during limited trials.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple data collection methods were employed: (1) structured behavioral observation checklists measuring independence indicators (task initiation, problem-solving, self-organization, peer assistance); (2) pre- and post-assessment instruments based on a Guttman scale; (3) semi-structured teacher interviews; (4) field notes and video documentation; and (5) expert validation panels. Quantitative pre-post data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Validity was ensured through source triangulation, member checking with teacher participants, and expert content validation.

Results and Discussion

The findings are organized into four thematic domains: (1) integration of Islamic character values into daily classroom practice; (2) improvements in children's independent behavior; (3) growth in teacher professional competence; and (4) effectiveness of character-based learning materials. Each domain is presented with empirical evidence and discussed in relation to theoretical and contextual literature.

Integration of Islamic Character Values in Daily Classroom Practice

Prior to the intervention, teachers at all participating institutions reported significant difficulty in translating Islamic character values into concrete, daily pedagogical practice. This aligns with findings from Wiyani (2018), who documented that 72% of RA teachers in Central Java reported feeling unprepared to deliver systematic character education due to the absence of practical, structured materials. Classroom observations at baseline confirmed this pattern: character education was delivered sporadically, primarily through morning circle recitation, without integration into thematic learning activities or developmental assessments.

Following model implementation, teachers successfully embedded Islamic character values into structured daily routines across all activity domains. The RPPH (structured lesson plans) provided

clear objectives, value-integration prompts, and reflection questions that allowed teachers to explicitly connect Islamic moral principles to children's lived experiences. For example, the value of *mas'uliyah* (responsibility) was linked to clean-up activities, with teachers referencing the hadith on cleanliness (Hadith Imam Muslim: "At-tuhuru shatrul iman" cleanliness is half of faith). The value of *ta'awun* (cooperation) was embedded into group play through structured peer-assistance tasks framed in age-appropriate Quranic language.

"Before this model, I knew the values I wanted to teach *amanah*, *mas'uliyah* but I did not know how to make them part of every lesson. The lesson plan showed me step by step how to connect the value to the activity, and how to use Islamic language the children could understand." Teacher 3, Tangerang

These findings are consistent with Lickona's (2019) principle that effective character education must be comprehensive, intentional, and embedded in the everyday culture of the learning environment not treated as a discrete subject. The Islamic framing of this integration added a spiritual dimension absent in secular character education models: every act of independence became an expression of *'ibadah* (worship) and *amanah* before Allah, deepening children's intrinsic motivation for moral behavior (Yusuf, 2018; Zulkifli et al., 2019).

Observation data showed that the frequency of teacher-initiated character discussions increased from an average of 1.2 instances per classroom session at baseline to 4.7 instances per session during the post-implementation phase representing a nearly fourfold increase in intentional character education delivery within daily instructional time.

Improvement in Children's Independent Behavior

The most quantitatively significant finding of this study was the marked improvement in children's independently demonstrated behaviors across all measured indicators. Pre-intervention baseline observations using the validated behavioral independence checklist revealed that only 37% of participating children consistently demonstrated two or more independent behaviors daily well below the developmental benchmarks described in the Casel Framework (2020) and Indonesia's STPPA (Standar Tingkat Pencapaian Perkembangan Anak, Permendikbud No. 137/2014) for children aged 4–6. Post-intervention data showed that 83% of children achieved this threshold, representing a 46-percentage-point improvement over the six-month implementation period.

Specific behavioral gains were documented across four independence dimensions:

- 1) Task Initiation Children initiating classroom responsibilities (e.g., preparing materials, cleaning up, arranging belongings) without teacher prompting increased from 31% to 79%.
- 2) Self-Help Skills Children completing personal care tasks independently (e.g., putting on shoes, washing hands properly, managing lunchboxes) improved from 44% to 88%.
- 3) Social Problem-Solving Children attempting to resolve peer conflicts or resource-sharing challenges before seeking adult intervention increased from 22% to 67%.
- 4) Verbalized Moral Reasoning Children articulating Islamic character values to justify behaviors (e.g., "Kita harus *ta'awun*!" "We must cooperate!"; "Aku harus *amanah*" "I must be trustworthy") increased from 18% to 74%.

These gains are consistent with and extend findings from comparable Islamic early childhood education research. Fauziddin and Mufarizuddin (2018) reported a 38-percentage-point improvement in prosocial behaviors following a 16-week Islamic narrative storytelling intervention in Indonesian RA settings. Yusuf (2018) similarly documented a 41-percentage-point increase in behavioral independence scores in Malaysian Islamic preschools implementing structured character

education programs. The present study's gains (46 percentage points) represent a comparable or superior effect, attributable in part to the multimodal, comprehensively structured nature of the model combining narrative, music, structured lesson plans, and teacher development in a coherent framework.

From a developmental perspective, these findings align with Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory, which identifies observational learning and behavioral reinforcement as primary pathways for character acquisition in early childhood. The Islamic dimension specifically the framing of independent behavior as an expression of *amanah* and *'ibadah* provided intrinsic motivational scaffolding that secular character education models often lack. As Rachmawati and Kurniati (2020) note, Islamic values-based motivation rooted in the child's *fitrah* produces more durable behavioral change than externally imposed behavioral rules, because it connects moral action to the child's developing sense of identity and spiritual belonging.

Montessori's (2004) principle that independence must be cultivated through prepared, purposeful environments rather than directed instruction was evident in the learning station design, where children made autonomous choices about task sequence and peer collaboration. Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding framework was operationalized through the teacher's role as *murabbi*: progressively reducing guidance as children internalized behavioral expectations and moral reasoning, consistent with the ZPD model of developmental support (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

Significantly, the behavioral gains extended beyond the classroom. Parents of 71% of participating children reported at informal feedback sessions that their children demonstrated increased initiative in home tasks such as preparing their own school bags, tidying their rooms without being asked, and helping younger siblings and spontaneously referenced Islamic values learned through *nasyid* and big books. This generalization of behavior across contexts is a hallmark of effective character education (Noddings, 2013; Berkowitz & Bier, 2014) and suggests that the Islamic framing of independence as personal responsibility before Allah rather than mere compliance with rules contributed to the internalization and transfer of learned behaviors.

Growth in Teacher Professional Competence

A key secondary outcome of the study was the substantial professional development experienced by participating teachers. This finding carries significant implications, as the quality of early childhood character education is directly mediated by teacher competence, confidence, and pedagogical creativity (Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013; Mulyasa, 2021). The Indonesian National Teacher Competency Assessment (UKG, 2019) found that early childhood educators including those in RA institutions scored an average of 53.7 out of 100 on pedagogical competence indicators, with character education integration among the weakest competency domains. This baseline context underscores the professional development potential of a model like the one developed in this study.

Pre-intervention interviews revealed that most teachers described their approach to character education as reliant on habitual oral reminders ("*selalu mengingatkan anak*") rather than structured, theory-grounded instructional design. None of the 10 teachers reported having a systematic lesson planning framework for character integration; only 3 reported using narrative materials specifically designed for Islamic character education; and only 2 reported using assessment tools to measure children's character development progress.

By the conclusion of the study, all 10 teachers demonstrated measurable improvements across these dimensions. Post-implementation, 9 of 10 teachers independently designed at least one new character-integrated RPPH using the model's framework without researcher support a strong indicator of genuine pedagogical transformation. Seven teachers adapted existing big book narratives

to incorporate locally relevant Islamic references and cultural contexts, demonstrating creative ownership of the pedagogical tools.

"Now I know how to connect the value of mas'uliyah to everything we do cleaning, praying, helping friends. Before, I only reminded children about behavior. Now I explain why, using the stories and the hadith, and I can see the children understand differently." Teacher 7, Sawangan

These outcomes reflect what Zeichner and Liston (2013) describe as reflective professional transformation the shift from habitual to intentional, theory-informed practice. The participatory R&D structure of the study which engaged teachers as co-developers rather than passive recipients of the model was instrumental in this transformation. This finding is consistent with research on teacher professional development: Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) found that professional learning programs that engage teachers in active application and collaborative reflection produce significantly greater and more durable competence gains than lecture-based or one-time training approaches. The model thus functioned simultaneously as a pedagogical tool for children's character development and as a platform for sustained Islamic pedagogical professional learning.

Effectiveness of Character-Based Learning Materials

Among the model's four components, Islamic narrative big books and nasyid were consistently identified by teachers as the most impactful elements for children's engagement and moral internalization. This aligns with a substantial body of research on multimodal learning in early childhood: Isbell et al. (2020) demonstrated that narrative-based instruction significantly enhances both moral reasoning and oral language development in young children; Sapsaglam and Arikan (2021) documented music's effectiveness in facilitating values education in early childhood through its mnemonic, emotional, and communal properties.

The Islamic narrative big books were specifically valued for creating structured moral discussion opportunities. Stories featuring Muslim child protagonists such as "Nita Anak Sholihah" resonated with children's cultural and religious identities, providing concrete reference points for abstract Islamic values. Teachers reported that post-reading discussions generated spontaneous moral reasoning in children: children not only identified the character's choices but debated alternatives and connected narrative events to their own daily experiences.

"When we read about Nita doing her own tasks without waiting for her mother, one child said, 'That's like me I must be amanah!' He was four years old. He connected the story to the word we had been learning. That was the moment I knew the model was working." Teacher 1, Tangerang

Nasyid demonstrated particular effectiveness in bridging the classroom and home environments. Parents of 71% of children reported hearing nasyid sung at home during daily activities, with several noting that their children referenced song lyrics to explain their behavior ("The song says we must help each other that's ta'awun, Bunda!"). This transfer effect reflects the mnemonic power of music in early moral learning (Hallam, 2010) and its role in aligning home and school character education identified by Berkowitz and Bier (2014) as a key predictor of sustained character development.

Structured lesson plans (RPPH) were rated as essential by all participating teachers for systematic character integration. Their value lay in providing an explicit pedagogical structure that translated abstract Islamic values into concrete, age-appropriate learning objectives and daily

activities bridging the gap between theological intent and classroom practice identified by Wiyani (2018) and Hapsari et al. (2022). Expert validators from Islamic early childhood education programs confirmed the materials' alignment with RA curriculum standards (Kemenag, 2020) and developmental appropriateness for the 4–6 age range, recommending the model for broader dissemination across RA institutions in Indonesia.

Collectively, these findings support the view articulated by Mulyasa (2021) and Rachmawati and Kurniati (2020) that effective Islamic character education in early childhood requires not a single intervention but an integrated, systemic approach that simultaneously addresses curriculum content, pedagogical tools, teacher capacity, and the spiritual-cultural context of learning. The model developed in this study operationalizes this systemic vision within a practical, validated, and replicable framework.

Conclusion

This research provides robust empirical evidence that a character-based learning model grounded in Islamic values can effectively foster independence in early childhood learners within Islamic educational settings. The model implemented through Islamic narrative big books, character-themed nasyid, and structured lesson plans in RA and PAUD Islam institutions in Tangerang and Sawangan produced a substantial 46-percentage-point increase in children's demonstrated independent behaviors (from 37% to 83%) and a significant transformation in teacher capacity to design and deliver character-integrated Islamic education.

The study demonstrates that character education in Islamic early childhood settings is most effective when it is intentional, value-integrated, and pedagogically structured embedding Islamic moral values (*amanah*, *mas'uliyah*, *ta'awun*) into the fabric of daily classroom experience rather than treating them as supplementary content. The Islamic framing of independence as *istiqlal* self-sufficiency rooted in personal responsibility before Allah and the community provided an intrinsic motivational dimension that reinforced behavioral internalization and extended the impact of the model beyond the classroom into children's home environments and family dynamics.

The participatory Research and Development structure of the study was particularly valuable: teachers who engaged as co-developers of the model demonstrated deeper ownership, greater creative adaptation, and more sustained implementation than typically reported in top-down curriculum reform studies. This finding suggests that Islamic early childhood teacher development programs should prioritize participatory, application-based learning over lecture-based training models.

The model's successful implementation across multiple RA/PAUD Islam sites, its alignment with both national PAUD curriculum mandates (Kemendikbudristek, 2022) and RA curriculum standards (Kemenag, 2020), and its positive reception by expert validators position it as a scalable and policy-aligned solution for strengthening character education in Islamic early childhood institutions across Indonesia. Future research should examine the longitudinal impact of this model on children's moral development, academic achievement, and civic engagement; explore its adaptation in rural, coastal, and pesantren-affiliated Islamic early childhood settings; and develop complementary parental engagement components to strengthen the home-school character education alignment that this study has shown to be a significant vector of the model's effectiveness.

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