
Tri-Center Educational Collaboration Model of School, Higher Education, and Pesantren in Strengthening Students' Religious Character

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the increasingly complex challenges of fostering students' religious character in the digital era, globalization, and rapid social change, while Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in schools has not yet fully succeeded in internalizing religious values optimally. The study aims to analyze a tri-center educational collaboration model involving schools, universities, and pesantren in strengthening students' religious character. This research employs a qualitative approach with a library research method. Data were collected from books, scientific journal articles, and relevant educational policy documents, then analyzed using content analysis. The findings indicate that collaboration among the three institutions can build a complementary educational ecosystem: schools' function as centers of formal learning and character habituation, universities as centers of knowledge development, research, and instructional innovation, and pesantren as centers of spiritual formation, moral education, and exemplary conduct. This synergy produces a more comprehensive, contextual, and sustainable IRE learning model that is effective in shaping students who are faithful, morally upright, moderate, and prepared to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Tri-Center Education, Islamic Religious Education, Religious Character, School, University, Pesantren.



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INTRODUCTION

Education is not only intended to develop students' intellectual abilities, but also to shape their character, morality, spirituality, and personality as provisions for life in society. From an Islamic perspective, education carries the core mission of forming human beings who are faithful, pious, and of noble character, and who are able to fulfil their function as servants of Allah and as stewards (*khalifah*) on earth. Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/PAI) therefore occupies a strategic position in building students' religious character through a learning process that emphasizes not only cognitive aspects, but also affective and psychomotor dimensions of

learning.

In the era of globalization and digital transformation, the world of education faces increasingly complex challenges. Advances in information technology bring considerable benefits to the learning process, but at the same time generate negative consequences such as declining ethical standards, rising consumerism, the spread of unverified information, a growing culture of individualism, and a weakening of exemplary role models in social life. Recent studies confirm that moral decadence among students in the digital era is characterized by an increase in deviant behaviour such as online game addiction, cyberbullying, and exposure to harmful content, driven both by weak internalization of religious values and by unsupervised access to technology.¹ Students are particularly vulnerable to these influences because they are at a formative stage of character and personality development. This condition indicates that strengthening religious character cannot rely solely on the delivery of Islamic Religious Education material inside the classroom, but requires the integrated involvement of multiple educational environments.

So far, character education in schools has often remained oriented toward the attainment of academic competence, so that character formation has not been optimally achieved.² Meanwhile, higher education institutions possess considerable academic resources, research capacity, learning innovation, and community-service programmes that can support the improvement of religious education quality. Pesantren, for their part, hold a comparative advantage in moral formation, the habituation of worship, exemplary leadership, and spiritual education that has proven capable of shaping students' character on a sustained basis.³ These three institutions therefore possess considerable potential to complement one another in building a more comprehensive educational system.

The concept of tri-center educational collaboration developed in this study builds synergy among schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren as three strategic pillars in strengthening students' religious character. This collaboration can be realized through the joint design of programmes, teacher training, collaborative research, learning mentorship, community service, the strengthening of a religious culture, and the habituation of Islamic values in daily life. In this way, the educational process does not take place solely within the school environment, but also gains support from the academic environment of higher education and the religious culture of the pesantren.

Previous studies show that collaboration-based character education is capable of enhancing students' religious attitudes, discipline, responsibility, and social concern. A recent study on tripartite education centres, for instance, demonstrates how collaboration among madrasahs, families, and communities can internalize religious values among Generation Alpha students through structured habituation, teacher role-modelling, and family monitoring of daily worship.⁴ However, that model of collaboration centres on the madrasah-family-community triad and has not specifically examined the synergy between formal schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren. Studies that specifically discuss a collaboration model among schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren in strengthening students' religious character therefore remain relatively limited. This gap forms an important basis for the present study to offer a more integrative collaboration model suited to the needs of contemporary Islamic education.

Based on the above description, this study aims to analyze the concept, roles, implementation, and development strategy of a tri-center educational collaboration model among schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren in strengthening students' religious character. The findings are expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of Islamic Religious Education, while also offering practical recommendations for schools, higher education institutions, pesantren, and policymakers in building an educational system capable of producing a generation that is faithful, of noble character, moderate, and competitive in the global era.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research (*kepastakaan*). This approach was chosen because the study aims to examine in depth the concept and implementation of the tri-center educational collaboration model involving schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren in strengthening students' religious character, based on a range of scholarly literature. Library research allows the researcher to obtain a comprehensive understanding of theories, concepts, findings of prior research, and relevant education policies related to the research theme.

The data sources in this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from books discussing Islamic Religious Education, character education, the concept of tri-center education, and national regulations on education. Secondary data were obtained from

national and international journal articles, seminar proceedings, prior research findings, and official government documents related to strengthening character education and Islamic Religious Education learning. Data collection was carried out through documentary study, namely by identifying, collecting, reading, examining, and classifying relevant literature. Literature was selected based on the credibility of the author, its relevance to the research theme, and the recency of publication so that the findings would rest on a solid scholarly foundation.

Data were analyzed using a content-analysis model. The stages of analysis included data reduction, data display, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting information relevant to the research focus. The data were then presented systematically to identify relationships between concepts. The interpretation stage was carried out by connecting theories of Islamic education, theories of character education, and the concept of tri-center education, so as to arrive at a collaboration model relevant for application in Islamic Religious Education learning. To ensure the validity of the data, this study used source triangulation, namely by comparing various references from books, scholarly journals, and education policy documents so as to obtain information that is valid, objective, and academically accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Roles and Functions of School, Higher Education Institution, and Pesantren in the Tri-Center Collaboration Model

Table 1. Roles and Functions of School, Higher Education Institution, and Pesantren in the Tri-Center Collaboration Model

Institution	Primary Function	Contribution to Strengthening Religious Character
School	Formal education provider delivering knowledge, skills, and structured character habituation.	Congregational prayer, Qur'an reading before lessons, joint supplication, commemoration of Islamic holidays, charitable giving, social activities, and a culture of mutual respect. Teachers and school principals act as role models in students' daily lives.
Higher Education Institution	Centre for knowledge development, research, learning innovation, and community service through the implementation of the Tridharma of Higher Education.	Teacher training, curriculum workshops, collaborative research, school mentorship, student community-service programmes (KKN), seminars, and development of technology-based learning media and religious moderation programmes.
Pesantren	Institution focusing on moral formation, habituation of worship, exemplary leadership of the <i>kyai</i> , and spiritual education.	Short-term pesantren programmes (<i>pesantren kilat</i>), Qur'an memorization (<i>tahfiz</i>) coaching, classical Islamic text studies (<i>kajian kitab</i>), worship training, discipline, and habituation of Islamic manners and values.

Tri-center education is a concept that emphasizes the importance of synergy among various educational environments in shaping students' character. In this study, tri-center education is defined as collaboration among schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren. Each of these three institutions has distinct characteristics, functions, and strengths that can complement one another in shaping students who are faithful, knowledgeable, of noble character, and capable of responding to the challenges of contemporary society.

Conceptual Model of Tri-Center Educational Collaboration

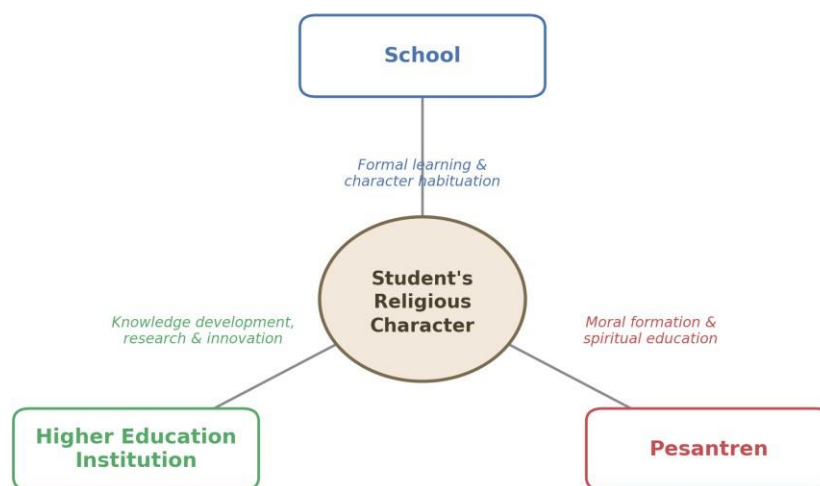


Figure 1 Conceptual Model of Tri-Center Educational Collaboration, Illustrating the Convergent Roles of School, Higher Education Institution, and Pesantren in Shaping Students' Religious Character

Schools function as formal education providers that deliver knowledge, skills, and character formation through a structured learning process. Higher education institutions play a role in the development of knowledge, research, learning innovation, and community service. Pesantren, meanwhile, possess particular strengths in moral formation, the habituation of worship, exemplary leadership by kyai, and students' spiritual development. The collaboration of these three institutions creates a mutually supportive educational system, so that the formation of religious character does not take place solely in the classroom, but also within students' social, academic, and religious lives.

The Role of Schools in Strengthening Religious Character

Schools carry substantial responsibility for integrating religious values into the entire learning process. Islamic Religious Education teachers are tasked not merely with delivering

subject matter, but also with becoming role models in attitude, behaviour, and the practice of Islamic values.

The implementation of religious character at the school level can be carried out through habituation activities such as congregational prayer, Qur'an reading before lessons, joint supplication, commemoration of major Islamic holidays, regular charitable giving, social activities, and the development of a culture of mutual respect. Religious values should also be integrated across subjects so that character education becomes the shared responsibility of all teachers, rather than being limited to Islamic Religious Education teachers. In addition, the school principal acts as a leader who develops a religious school culture through policies, work programmes, supervision, and teacher development. Such leadership is important for establishing a shared commitment among the entire school community to strengthening students' religious character.

The Role of Higher Education Institutions in Strengthening Religious Character

Higher education institutions have a strategic function as centres for knowledge development and educational innovation. This function is formally mandated through the three pillars of higher education (*Tridharma Perguruan Tinggi*), namely education and teaching, research, and community service, as stipulated in Indonesian higher education law.⁷ Through research and community service, higher education institutions can provide mentorship and professional support to schools and pesantren in developing innovative models of Islamic Religious Education. Collaboration can be realized through seminars, teacher training, curriculum workshops, joint research, school mentorship, and student community-service programmes (*Kuliah Kerja Nyata/KKN*). Lecturers can also serve as resource persons in the development of technology-based learning media, religious moderation, and innovative pedagogical approaches. Through these activities, higher education institutions can bridge the gap between academic theory and the practical needs of schools and pesantren. In this way, higher education institutions do not merely produce competent graduates, but also function as agents of educational change that contribute to improving the quality of religious education in society.

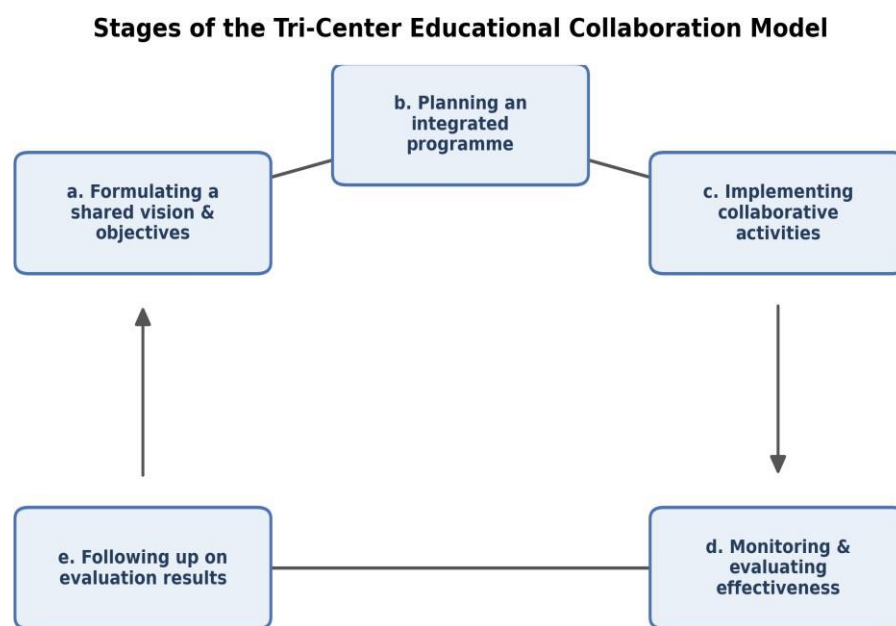
The Role of Pesantren in Strengthening Religious Character

Pesantren are Islamic educational institutions with particular strengths in shaping students' morality and spirituality. Recent studies confirm that pesantren implement holistic and integrated character-education systems grounded in exemplary behaviour, habituation, and spiritual

reinforcement. These institutions have also demonstrated their ability to adapt to the demands of modern society without abandoning their traditional core values. Comparable findings indicate that moral education in pesantren can contribute to the internalization of humanitarian and religious values through sustained guidance and a supportive communal environment.⁹ The pesantren education system emphasizes the habituation of worship, teachers' exemplary conduct, discipline, sincerity, independence, responsibility, and a simple way of life.

Various methods of character education implemented within pesantren, including moral instruction (*mau'izhah*), habituation, exemplary leadership, and discipline within the boarding environment, have been shown to shape distinctive and sustainable forms of student character.¹⁰ These values are highly relevant to strengthening students' religious character in a modern era characterized by complex moral challenges. Schools can therefore collaborate with pesantren through short-term religious programmes (*pesantren kilat*), Qur'an memorization (*tahfiz*) coaching, classical Islamic text studies (*kajian kitab*), worship training, and the habituation of Islamic manners. Such collaboration provides students with a more meaningful learning experience because religious education is acquired not only through theoretical instruction but also through direct practice in everyday life.

The Tri-Center Educational Collaboration Model



Continuous cycle: follow-up findings feed back into the formulation of shared vision for the next collaboration cycle.

Figure 2 Stages of the Tri-Center Educational Collaboration Model, from the Formulation of a Shared Vision to Follow-Up on Evaluation Results

The tri-center educational collaboration model developed in this study consists of several interconnected stages:

1. Formulating a shared vision and objectives. The school, higher education institution, and pesantren establish a common vision and objectives related to strengthening students' religious character.
2. Planning an integrated programme. The three institutions jointly design an integrated religious character education programme that is aligned with students' developmental needs and institutional capacities.
3. Implementing collaborative activities. The programme is implemented through activities such as teacher training, student coaching, seminars, religious mentoring, joint research, and community service.
4. Conducting monitoring and evaluation. The participating institutions periodically monitor the implementation process and evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative programmes.
5. Following up on evaluation results. The results of monitoring and evaluation are used as a basis for improving and developing subsequent programmes.

This model places students at the centre of the educational process. Therefore, every collaborative activity is directed toward strengthening religious character as reflected in students' attitudes, behaviour, responsibility, discipline, spiritual practices, and social concern.

Implementation Challenges

Table 2. Implementation Challenges and Recommended Strategies in Tri-Center Educational Collaboration

Implementation Challenge	Recommended Strategy
Insufficient coordination among educational institutions	Building shared commitment and establishing formal communication channels among schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren.
Differences in curriculum and educational orientation	Formulating a shared vision and jointly planning an integrated religious character education programme.
Limited human resources	Improving teacher and staff competence through sustained training, coaching, and mentorship.
Suboptimal use of technology	Strengthening digital literacy and developing technology-based learning media collaboratively.
Influence of digital media on students' behaviour	Strengthening digital supervision and literacy, securing government policy support, and involving families and communities in continuous monitoring.

Several obstacles may still be encountered in implementing tri-center educational

collaboration, including insufficient coordination among educational institutions, differences in curriculum and educational orientation, limited human resources, suboptimal use of technology, and the influence of digital media on students' behaviour. Overcoming these challenges requires strong shared commitment among the participating institutions. Government policy support, continuous teacher development, strengthened digital literacy, effective communication, and community involvement are also necessary to ensure that the collaboration can operate sustainably.

Implications for Islamic Religious Education Learning

The tri-center educational collaboration model has important implications for the implementation of Islamic Religious Education because it expands the learning environment beyond the classroom. Through collaboration among schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren, PAI learning can become more contextual, experiential, and closely connected to students' everyday lives. First, collaboration can improve the quality of PAI learning by providing teachers with access to academic resources, training, innovative learning approaches, and research-based educational practices. Higher education institutions can contribute through lecturer expertise, curriculum development, research, and technology-based learning innovation.

Second, collaboration with pesantren can strengthen the practical dimension of religious education. Students are not only introduced to Islamic concepts theoretically, but are also given opportunities to practise worship, discipline, Islamic manners, responsibility, and social concern within a supportive religious environment. Third, the model can strengthen the religious culture of schools. Religious activities become part of students' daily habits rather than being limited to formal classroom instruction. This supports the development of consistent religious attitudes and behaviour.

Fourth, the model strengthens relationships among educational institutions and the wider community. Schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren can share resources, knowledge, expertise, and educational responsibilities. Such cooperation creates a more comprehensive ecosystem for students' character development. Thus, the tri-center educational collaboration model positions PAI not merely as a subject taught in schools, but as an integrated educational process involving knowledge, habituation, exemplary behaviour, spiritual development, and

social interaction. Through sustained collaboration, students are expected to develop religious character that is reflected in their faith, worship, morality, responsibility, discipline, tolerance, and concern for others.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the tri-center educational collaboration model involving schools, higher education institutions, and pesantren is an effective strategy for strengthening students' religious character. Schools play a role in the provision of formal education and character habituation; higher education institutions function as centres for the development of knowledge, research, and learning innovation; while pesantren contribute to the formation of morality, spirituality, and the habituation of Islamic values. The collaboration of these three institutions produces a more comprehensive educational system capable of shaping students who possess a balance between intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social dimensions. Implementing this model requires the commitment of all stakeholders, policy support, improved educator competence, and continuous evaluation, so that the strengthening of religious character can be achieved optimally. Given that this study relies on a qualitative library-research design, future research employing field-based methods such as case studies or mixed-methods evaluation of tri-center programmes actually implemented in specific schools, universities, and pesantren would be valuable to empirically test the effectiveness of the proposed collaboration model and to refine its stages of implementation.

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