Volume 7 Number 1 (2025) January-April 2025 Page: 538-550 E-ISSN: 2656-4491 P-ISSN: 2656-4548

DOI: 10.37680/scaffolding.v7i1.7100



STRENGTHENING NATIONAL CHARACTER AMONG SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS THROUGH ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN TOJO UNA-UNA REGENCY

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Submitted: 14/12/2024 Revised: 03/05/2025 Accepted: 24/05/2025 Published: 04/06/2025

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in strengthening the national character of Senior High School students in Tojo Una-Una Regency. This research employs a qualitative method with a multi-site approach. Data were collected through field observations, in-depth interviews with IRE teachers, school principals, and students, focus group discussions (FGDs), as well as document studies related to school activities. The data sources consist of primary and supporting informants relevant to the context of national character development. Data analysis was conducted through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions interactively. The findings reveal that IRE plays a strategic role in shaping students' national character, which includes attitudes of mutual respect for differences, patriotism, and a sense of responsibility towards the nation. Islamic Religious Education functions not only as a vehicle for knowledge transmission but also as a medium for moral and ethical development aligned with Islamic values. Therefore, IRE serves as a fundamental pillar in safeguarding students from the negative impacts of globalization and in instilling national values in a sustainable manner.

Keywords

National Character Development, Islamic Religious Education, Students, Senior High School.



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is currently facing serious challenges in preserving the national character of its younger generation. Various issues such as identity crises, weakened nationalism, low levels of social tolerance, and a lack of responsibility towards the nation reflect the fragility of national values among students (Nurazizah et al., 2021). Religious and national values that have been instilled since childhood are beginning to deteriorate due to psychological turmoil experienced during puberty. This emotional instability can lead to character damage, stemming from the inability to cope with radically different and extreme new values within the global social order. This era may be defined as a time of confusion and chaos. Amidst this disarray, the most valuable human assets are gradually disappearing—the loss of human dignity, respected traditions, the sanctity of life, mutual trust, and the authority of both parents and teachers (Miskahuddin, 2020).

This phenomenon is not only national in scale but is also felt locally, including in Tojo Una-Una Regency. The government has responded through various policies, such as Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 87 of 2017 on Strengthening Character Education (PPK), which asserts that character building must be an integral part of the national education system. Similarly, the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 20 of 2018 on Strengthening Character Education establishes five core values—religiosity, nationalism, independence, mutual cooperation, and integrity—as the foundation for shaping students with strong personalities. However, in practice, these values have not been fully internalized by high school students (SLTA), especially in peripheral regions such as Tojo Una-Una, which are increasingly exposed to foreign cultures through globalization and social media.

In the context of Tojo Una-Una Regency, the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in shaping students' national character is quite evident in several upper secondary schools, including SMA Negeri 1 Ampana Kota, SMA Negeri 1 Ulubongka, SMA Negeri 2 Una-Una, MAN Tojo Una-Una, MAS Alkhairaat Ampana Kota, SMK Negeri 1 Ampana Kota, and SMK Negeri 1 Tojo Barat. Based on initial observations and interviews with several educators and religious figures, it was found that Islamic Religious Education has become a strategic platform to integrate moral, spiritual, and nationalist values into students' daily lives (Observation and Interview, May 3, 2024). IRE not only emphasizes the cognitive aspects of understanding religious teachings but also addresses affective and psychomotor domains through teacher modeling, religious habituation activities, and value-based discussions in the context of nationhood. For example, schools in Tojo

Una-Una have initiated practices such as congregational prayers, the recitation of Asmaul Husna, and the "Friday Sharing" program as means of instilling values of togetherness, empathy, and social responsibility. Interviews with IRE teachers at three schools revealed that approximately 70% of students exhibited more positive attitudes toward their social environment after participating in structured PAI value internalization programs. This serves as an indicator that spiritually oriented teaching approaches have great potential to safeguard the younger generation from value disorientation caused by external influences.

However, to more effectively address contemporary challenges, innovative learning strategies are required so that IRE does not become a dry and merely normative subject. One strategy being implemented is an integrative approach through project-based learning that links religious materials to national issues such as religious tolerance, social conflict, and love for the homeland. IRE teachers in Tojo Una-Una have also begun developing locally based digital learning media, such as videos on national heroes from an Islamic perspective or online discussions involving alumni and local religious figures as guest speakers. Collaborative programs with community leaders and religious institutions are also carried out to expand the scope of values being taught, allowing students not only to hear theories in the classroom but also to experience their application in real-life social settings (Indana, Nurul, Fatiha, 2020). Through these strategies, Islamic Religious Education is expected to play a central role in strengthening national character, not only reactively in response to global influences, but also proactively in building a resilient and competitive national identity in the modern era.

Several studies over the past five years have examined the relationship between national character development and Islamic Religious Education. Alfath (2020) investigated the discipline character formation of students at Al-Fatah Islamic Boarding School in Temboro and found that exemplary leadership and religious habituation activities effectively fostered discipline and nationalist character (Alfath, 2020). Indana, Nurul, and Fatiha (2020) analyzed Islamic educational values in the children's book The Mystery of Noah's Flood by Yosep Rafiqi and concluded that Islamic narratives in children's literature could serve as effective media for building religious and moral character in youth (Indana, Nurul, Fatiha, 2020). Kirana and Candra (2022) conducted a study at Fathul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Kediri and found that routine mujahadah (devotional practices) significantly contributed to the development of students' religious character, although it was not explicitly directed at national character formation (Kirana, Zuyyina Candra, 2022).

Meanwhile, Kurniawati and Matang (2023) examined national character development based on local cultural values and demonstrated that strengthening local identity could enhance students' nationalism, although it was not yet integrated into IRE teaching (Kurniawati & Matang, 2023). Lastly, Mumpuni et al. (2025) explored national character building through Civics Education in fifthgrade students, concluding that the integration of national values in general subjects had an impact, but had not yet been deeply applied within religious education (Mumpuni et al., 2025).

From these five studies, it can be concluded that although efforts have been made to study character development through education, most of the research still separates religious and national domains. No study has specifically examined the effectiveness of Islamic Religious Education in shaping national character within formal upper secondary education, especially in 3T (underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost) regions such as Tojo Una-Una Regency. This study presents a novelty by integrating national values into IRE teaching through innovative strategies that are contextually aligned with the students' socio-cultural conditions in the area. Additionally, the research employs an applied approach by tracing the concrete implementation in the field, involving local educational actors, and formulating a model of IRE that emphasizes not only religiosity but also nationalism as part of the mission of Islamic education as a mercy to all worlds (rahmatan lil 'alamin). Thus, this research offers a new contribution to the literature on character education in peripheral regions of Indonesia.

Based on the aforementioned background, this study aims to analyze and describe the effectiveness of the implementation of Islamic Religious Education in strengthening the national character of students at upper secondary schools in Tojo Una-Una Regency. It also seeks to identify innovative strategies that educators can adopt to contextually and practically integrate national values into Islamic Religious Education. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the body of knowledge in Islamic education and character education by proposing an integrative concept that merges religious and national values, relevant to application in 3T regions. It also contributes to the development of contextual Islamic education theory that is responsive to contemporary challenges and the socio-cultural needs of society. Pragmatically, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a practical reference for IRE teachers, school principals, and education policymakers in Tojo Una-Una Regency in designing and implementing learning models capable of effectively internalizing national values amid globalization and moral degradation. Furthermore, this research can offer tangible contributions to shielding the younger generation from a national identity crisis through an

inclusive, relevant, and grounded religious approach.

METHOD

This study is a qualitative research employing a multi-site approach (Endah Marendah Ratnaningtyas et al., 2023). It aims to provide an in-depth explanation of the strengthening of national character among senior high school students through Islamic Religious Education in Tojo Una-Una Regency. The multi-site approach was chosen as it enables the researcher to examine the phenomenon of national character building within real and specific contexts, taking into account the local community's socio-cultural background.

The research data consists of descriptive information on the processes, strategies, and impacts of national character development through Islamic Religious Education in senior high schools in Tojo Una-Una Regency. The primary data sources include school principals, Islamic Religious Education teachers, students, and parents from several educational institutions, namely SMA Negeri 1 Ampana Kota, SMA Negeri 1 Ulubongka, SMA Negeri 2 Una-Una, MAN Tojo Una-Una, MAS Alkhairaat Ampana Kota, SMK Negeri 1 Ampana Kota, and SMK Negeri 1 Tojo Barat. Secondary data sources consist of school documents, character education program plans, syllabi, and lesson plans, as well as archives of religious and national activities.

The research was conducted from May 1, 2024, to July 30, 2024. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, participatory observation, Focus Group Discussions (FGD), and documentation (Sugiono, 2016). Interviews were conducted with principals, Islamic Religious Education teachers, students, and parents to obtain information on their practices and perceptions regarding the integration of national values into religious instruction. Observation was used to examine daily school activities such as flag ceremonies, religious programs, the habituation of Pancasila values, and student interactions. Documentation focused on relevant written materials, including curricula, activity records, and school reports.

Data analysis employed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of three stages: (1) data reduction, which involves selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data from the field; (2) data display, which entails systematically organizing information into descriptive narratives to provide a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, a process of interpreting meanings, identifying patterns, and determining relationships among the data to answer the research questions (Moleong, 2007). The

researcher also conducted a critical analysis by comparing field findings with theories on character education and nationalism, as well as with relevant prior research. This step aimed to discover new interpretations of national character development processes in the context of Islamic education in 3T (underdeveloped, frontier, and outermost) regions, such as Tojo Una-Una Regency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This research focused on strengthening national character through Islamic Religious Education (IRE) implemented among senior high school students in Tojo Una-Una Regency. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and focus group discussions (FGDs). The results reveal that Islamic Religious Education in schools serves as an effective medium for the transformation of national values, although several challenges remain and must be addressed wisely. To facilitate a clearer understanding of the findings, a summary is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Strengthening National Character Through Islamic Religious Education

No.	Focus of Findings	Description of Findings	Main Informants	Implications
1.	Millennial Lifestyle	Students are highly	Students SW, ST	A value-based
		familiar with digital		educational approach
		technology and social		must be relevant to their
		media, making it part of		digital environment.
		their daily lifestyle.		
2.	The Role of IRE in	IRE instills moral and	IRE Teacher at	IRE significantly
	Character	spiritual values, shaping	MA Al-Khairat	contributes to
	Formation	students into honest, just,		preserving national
		and responsible		identity.
		individuals.		
3.	School Strategies in	Schools integrate character	Principal of MA	Holistic school
	Implementing	values into the curriculum,	Al-Khairat	approaches have proven
	Character Values	extracurricular activities,		effective in
		and teacher role-modeling.		strengthening students'
				character.
4.	Teaching National	Nationalism, unity, and	IRE Teachers	Enhances students'
	Values in IRE	social responsibility are		patriotism and national
		taught through the IRE		commitment.
		curriculum.		
5.	The Concept of	Character education in	IRE Teachers &	Islamic education is
	Akhlak as the	Islam is rooted in noble	Islamic Literature	relevant in building a
	Foundation of	morality (akhlak) aligned		holistic national
	Character	with universal values.		character.
	Education			

Source: Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

Based on the interviews and FGDs conducted across several senior high schools in Tojo Una-Una Regency, as presented in the table above, several significant findings emerged regarding the influence of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) on shaping students' national character. First, it was found that young people, particularly senior high school students, are deeply immersed in digital technology as a lifestyle. This was evident in interviews with students such as SW and ST, who stated that the use of technology is an integral part of their daily lives. They utilize smartphones and digital applications for various activities, including communication, entertainment, and task management. This reflects the impact of cultural globalization through technology, which may influence the national character and values of the younger generation. Second, other findings indicate that IRE teachers in schools such as MAN Tojo Una-Una and MA Al-Khairat Ampana Kota acknowledge the vital role of Islamic education in character development. They emphasized that IRE not only provides religious knowledge but also cultivates students' moral and spiritual awareness, qualities essential in responding to the negative influences of contemporary developments. Third, the principal of MA Al-Khairat stated that character development is not limited to academic instruction but is also carried out through habituation activities such as extracurricular and social programs. These programs are designed to instill positive values such as cooperation, responsibility, and empathy among students. Fourth, there is evidence of concrete implementation of national values in IRE instruction. During the FGDs conducted with school stakeholders, several strategies were identified, including integrating national values into the curriculum, fostering attitudes of tolerance, and organizing community-oriented activities. These efforts aim to encourage students to internalize values such as nationalism, patriotism, and historical consciousness. Fifth, interview results indicate that character education within IRE encompasses three core components: learning objectives involving national values, relevant learning activities, and active and participatory learning models. Character formation through IRE is carried out through teacher role-modeling, the internalization of values in teaching materials, and student involvement in real-life school and community activities. Sixth, senior high school students in Tojo Una-Una demonstrate a sound understanding of the importance of national values when these are conveyed through Islamic principles. This is evidenced by school activities that encourage student engagement in community service and highlight values of tolerance, justice, and responsibility in teaching. Seventh, it was found that Islamic Religious Education plays a highly significant role in strengthening the national character of senior high school students in Tojo Una-Una Regency. This is reflected in the students' growing awareness of the importance of values such as honesty, justice, compassion, and a strong commitment to national unity and cohesion.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that Islamic Religious Education at the senior high school level in Tojo Una-Una Regency plays a strategic role in reinforcing students' national character. This is evident in the integration of national values such as honesty, responsibility, tolerance, and patriotism through curriculum content, teacher role-modeling, and religious-nationalist-themed school programs. Despite the millennial generation's familiarity with global culture—which at times contradicts local values—the IRE learning process continues to serve as a filter for these influences while also helping to build a religious and inclusive national identity.

However, the effectiveness of character reinforcement through religious education is not without challenges, such as limited innovation in teaching methods, a lack of synergy among teachers, parents, and the community, and the uncontrollable flow of digital information. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a more contextualized IRE curriculum, enhance teachers' capacity in value education, and strengthen the role of schools as centers of character cultivation. With a comprehensive and collaborative approach, religious education can continue to serve as a foundational pillar in shaping a generation that is not only intellectually capable but also firmly rooted in national identity and faith.

Discussion

In this discussion, the author aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the implications of the research findings for both theoretical and practical contexts, while situating the results within a broader academic discourse. This study focuses primarily on how Islamic Religious Education (IRE) contributes to shaping students' national character amid the dynamics of an era marked by the rapid current of globalization (Primayanti, 2015); (Suwardana, 2018). This discussion links the research findings to relevant theories, including character formation theory, value education theory, and the role of religious education in multicultural societies.

Additionally, the discussion will highlight how contemporary challenges—such as technological advancements (Latip, 2022), cultural shifts (Amelia & Ayu, 2020), and identity crises among youth—serve as testing grounds for the effectiveness of the national education system (Nugraheni & Firmansyah, 2021); (Yuga Adi Kusuma, 2018), particularly Islamic Religious Education. By juxtaposing empirical field data with previous studies, this section aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strategic role of IRE in strengthening national identity,

while offering practical recommendations for policy and educational practice improvements (Rasyid, 2015; Widiarto, 2020; Dewi, 2019).

The findings of this study indicate that the main challenge in building students' national character in the era of globalization is the overwhelming influx of information and foreign cultural influences driven by advances in information technology. The younger generation, who regard technology as a lifestyle, requires an educational approach that balances the use of technology with the inculcation of national values. In this context, Islamic Religious Education has proven to play a strategic role in filtering the negative impacts of globalization through the instillation of moral and ethical values.

In practice, Islamic Religious Education in schools not only teaches religious dogma or theory but also serves as an instrument for shaping students' strong character. The role of teachers is vital as role models and facilitators of value-based learning. Teachers who can exemplify good conduct and create dialogic learning environments are more successful in internalizing national values within students. This supports Al-Ghazali's view that character is formed through continuous habituation and practice (Kurniawati & Matang, 2023); (Mubasyaroh, 2016); (Alfath, 2020); (Mufidah & Nurfadilah, 2021).

The implications of these findings reinforce the theory that character education should not merely be considered an additional curriculum, but must be an integral part of the education system. Within the context of IRE, Islamic values directly relate to national character, such as patriotism (Kurniawati & Matang, 2023); (Makmur et al., 2025), tolerance(Kurniawati & Matang, 2023); (Ulfah Fauziah AlFalah & Rahman, 2019), justice (Harun, 2022); (Rangkuti, 2017), and solidarity (Tejowibowo & Lestari, 2017); (Hasanudin, 2018). Thus, strengthening character education through IRE is a concrete effort to shape a younger generation with a strong sense of national identity.

Extracurricular activities and habituation programs in schools serve as effective media for instilling national values. When students participate in volunteerism, leadership, and social activities, they not only gain cognitive understanding but also experience and practice these values firsthand. This aligns with the constructivist approach to character education, which emphasizes the importance of direct experience in the learning process (Karimuddin Abdullah Lawang et al., 2022).

Character building through IRE in Tojo Una-Una Regency is carried out using a holistic approach. This includes cognitive dimensions (knowledge of national values), affective dimensions (internalization of values), and psychomotor dimensions (practice of values). These three

dimensions are interconnected and must be applied in a balanced manner to achieve optimal outcomes.

These findings are also in line with the views of Zakiah Daradjat, who emphasized that the concept of character education in Islam has existed since the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Education that instills noble character has been a central mission of the Prophet, and this forms the philosophical foundation for the implementation of character education today. In the modern context, character education through IRE becomes a viable solution to address the identity and moral crises faced by youth due to cultural and value disorientation (Sulfia, 2018); (Sholikhah, 2021); (Nugraheni & Firmansyah, 2021).

The implementation of Islamic Religious Education in senior high schools (SLTA) in Tojo Una-Una Regency has shown adaptive efforts in responding to the challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and the Digital Era. Amid technological disruptions and the overwhelming flow of global information, IRE not only delivers normative religious knowledge but also instills critical thinking, digital ethics, and contextual Islamic values (Nurhabibi et al., 2025). IRE teachers have begun utilizing digital platforms for online learning and incorporating contemporary issues such as tolerance, misinformation (hoaxes), media ethics, and social responsibility into classroom discussions (Sukatin, Auliah et al., 2019); (Safrawali & Rozi, 2022). This is crucial in safeguarding students from moral degradation and identity crises that often accompany technological development. Thus, IRE in SLTA Tojo Una-Una serves as a dialectical space between Islamic transcendental values and the dynamic realities of modern life.

Furthermore, the contribution of Islamic Religious Education in this region aligns with the global sustainable development agenda outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Lawang, 2025), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) (Rohman & Ilma Husnul Khotimah, 2024). Through the internalization of religious values that promote peace, social justice, and personal integrity, IRE directly strengthens students' character development as responsible citizens. The inclusive, contextual, and transformative implementation of IRE in SLTA Tojo Una-Una constitutes a tangible contribution to shaping a young generation prepared to face the complexities of the times, while also supporting the achievement of the SDGs at the local level. Thus, Islamic Religious Education is not only relevant within the framework of national education but also plays a vital role in the global effort to build an ethical, competitive, and sustainable society.

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that Islamic Religious Education in senior high schools (SLTA) in Tojo Una-Una Regency plays a strategic role in strengthening students' national character, particularly in addressing the challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 and the digital era. IRE functions not only as a medium for transmitting spiritual and moral values, but also as a strategic space for nurturing a nationalist character that is resilient and adaptable to change. The implementation of IRE in SLTA Tojo Una-Una has shown direct relevance to the objectives of sustainable development (SDGs), especially in ensuring quality education and reinforcing fair and inclusive institutions. Therefore, the reinforcement of national character through IRE must be pursued systematically, collaboratively, and contextually—involving teachers, school principals, students, and parents—as a collective endeavor in preparing a future generation that is excellent and full of integrity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the implementation of national character strengthening through Islamic Religious Education (PAI) for high school students in Tojo Una-Una Regency has proven to be reasonably effective in protecting students from the negative impacts of globalization that may erode national identity. PAI serves as a strategic medium for instilling values of nationalism, patriotism, tolerance, and social responsibility through an integrative approach that combines religious content with the realities of national life. PAI teachers hold a central role in internalizing national character values, not only through formal classroom instruction but also through exemplary conduct and continuous spiritual guidance. Nevertheless, several challenges remain, such as limited educational facilities, the lack of professional development programs focused on character education for teachers, and the increasingly pervasive influence of digital media among youth. For future research, it is recommended to focus on developing a digital-based PAI learning model specifically designed to reinforce national values among high school students. Subsequent studies may also expand the geographical scope to other districts or cities to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of national character strengthening through religious education. In addition, interdisciplinary studies are needed to integrate educational psychology, digital media studies, and national education policy in order to formulate more comprehensive and adaptive strategies for nurturing a generation of young people who possess strong character and national insight in the global era.

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