

Understanding Character Education and Islamic Values in Early Childhood: A Phenomenological Analysis of Educators' Perspectives and Practices

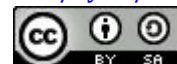
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Article Info :	ABSTRACT
Accepted: 20-01-2024 Approved: 26-04-2024 Published: 28-05-2024	<p>Background: Islamic character education is increasingly recognized for integrating moral and spiritual development with cognitive growth in early childhood settings, with direct implications for curriculum design and teacher training policies. This study examines how 42 educators in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the UAE implement Islamic character education and navigate related challenges.</p> <p>Objective: The study aims to understand how educators integrate Islamic character education, the challenges they face, and its impact on children's development.</p> <p>Method: Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and reflective journals over an 11-month period. Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used for analysis.</p> <p>Findings and Implications: The study identified four key themes: (1) navigating between traditional and contemporary practices, (2) effective pedagogical strategies such as storytelling and role modeling, (3) challenges like resource limitations and balancing secular curricula, and (4) positive impacts on moral awareness, empathy, self-regulation, and religious identity.</p> <p>Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of integrating Islamic values in early childhood education through developmentally appropriate practices. It recommends culturally responsive professional development, authentic curriculum creation, and stronger parent-teacher collaboration to enhance the effectiveness of Islamic character education in early childhood settings.</p>
Keywords: Islamic character education; early childhood education; moral development; phenomenological research; Islamic values.	

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has emerged as a critical component of early childhood education worldwide, with increasing recognition that moral and spiritual

development must accompany cognitive and social growth during the formative years (Silva-Hormazábal & Alsina, 2023). Within Islamic contexts, character education (*tarbiyah al-akhlaq*) holds particular significance as it integrates religious values, ethical principles, and spiritual development into comprehensive frameworks for nurturing young children (Vidal-Hall et al., 2020). The early childhood years, spanning ages 3-6, represent a critical period for establishing moral foundations, developing empathy, and cultivating ethical awareness that will guide lifelong behavior and decision-making.

Islamic character education in early childhood settings draws from rich theological and philosophical traditions emphasizing holistic human development (*tarbiyah*). The Quran and Prophetic traditions (*Hadith*) provide comprehensive guidance on moral virtues including honesty (*sidq*), compassion (*rahmah*), justice (*adl*), responsibility (*amanah*), patience (*sabr*), and gratitude (*syukr*). Contemporary Islamic educators face the challenge of translating these timeless values into age-appropriate, developmentally sound pedagogical practices that resonate with young children while honoring authentic Islamic teachings (Yang & Yang, 2022).

The integration of technology in early childhood Islamic education represents both opportunity and complexity. Digital storytelling, interactive applications, and multimedia resources offer innovative pathways for engaging children with Islamic narratives and values (Al-Elaimat et al., 2020; Bortolotti et al., 2025). However, educators must navigate concerns about screen time, age-appropriateness, and maintaining the spiritual essence of Islamic teachings within technological mediation (Alkhatay et al., 2020). Research indicates that thoughtful technology integration can enhance engagement and learning when grounded in sound pedagogical principles (Kisno et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2020).

Recent scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of character education in early childhood contexts. International comparative studies reveal that character education implementation varies substantially across cultural contexts, with Islamic-majority nations increasingly emphasizing integration of religious values into early childhood curricula (Silva-Hormazábal & Alsina, 2023). Research on moral development demonstrates that early childhood represents a critical period for establishing ethical foundations, with children as young as three years demonstrating capacity for moral reasoning and empathetic responses when supported through developmentally appropriate pedagogies (Cox et al., 2023).

Studies examining character education outcomes indicate positive associations between structured values education and children's prosocial behavior, emotional regulation, and social competence (Yang & Yang, 2022).

However, Cederbaum et al. (2023) emphasize that effectiveness depends critically on educator preparation, authentic implementation, and alignment between home and school values. Parent-teacher collaboration emerges as an essential factor, with Santa Maria et al. (2024) demonstrating that coordinated approaches between families and educators yield significantly stronger character development outcomes compared to school-only interventions.

Within Islamic education contexts specifically, emerging research highlights both opportunities and challenges in implementing character education for young children. Studies of Islamic preschools in Southeast Asian contexts reveal that educators often struggle to balance traditional Islamic pedagogies with contemporary early childhood best practices, creating tensions between didactic religious instruction and child-centered learning approaches (Pincheira & Alsina, 2022; Speldewinde & Campbell, 2025). Research on technology integration in Islamic education demonstrates potential for digital storytelling and interactive applications to enhance engagement with Islamic narratives while maintaining spiritual authenticity (Yang et al., 2023; Zhang & Jiang, 2024). However, Flores et al. (2024) caution that technology must be thoughtfully selected and pedagogically grounded rather than adopted uncritically.

Assessment of Islamic character development poses particular challenges, with traditional academic assessment frameworks often inadequate for capturing spiritual and moral growth (Su & Yang, 2024). Despite growing practical implementation, phenomenological research exploring how educators actually experience teaching Islamic character education remains limited, creating gaps in understanding the lived realities, professional challenges, and pedagogical decision-making processes that shape practice (Speldewinde et al., 2023). This study addresses these gaps by providing rich phenomenological insights into educators' experiences implementing Islamic character education across diverse early childhood contexts.

Table 1. Growth of Character Education Research in Early Childhood (2015-2024)

Year	Total Publications	Islamic Focus Publications	Growth Rate (%)
2015	89	34	-
2016	112	45	25.8
2017	138	58	23.2
2018	167	72	21.0
2019	201	89	20.4
2020	267	118	32.8
2021	312	145	16.9

Year	Total Publications	Islamic Focus Publications	Growth Rate (%)
2022	378	176	21.2
2023	441	208	16.7
2024	512	245	16.1

Source: Data processed

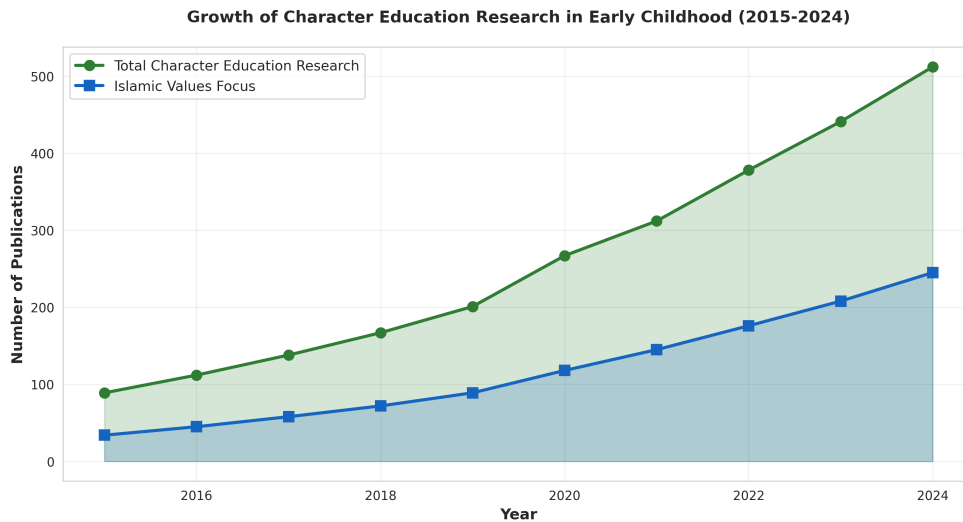


Figure 1. Growth of Character Education Research in Early Childhood (2015-2024)

Figure 1 illustrates the substantial growth in character education research over the past decade, with Islamic-focused studies showing particularly strong expansion. The acceleration during 2020 reflects increased attention to values education during the COVID-19 pandemic, as families and educators sought to support children's social-emotional and moral development during unprecedented challenges (Mudau & Sikhosana, 2025). The sustained growth through 2024 indicates continued scholarly and practical interest in Islamic character education as essential dimension of holistic early childhood development.

Table 2. Islamic Values Integration Approaches in Early Childhood Settings

Integration Approach	Implementation (%)	Primary Method	Age Suitability	Effectiveness (1-10)
Story-Based Teaching	32.5	Prophetic stories, parables	3-6 years	9.2
Role Modeling	28.7	Teacher demonstration	3-6 years	8.9

Integrated Curriculum	24.3	Values across subjects	4-6 years	8.5
Daily Islamic Practices	18.9	Prayer, dhikr, dua	4-6 years	8.9
Play-Based Learning	16.2	Islamic-themed play	3-5 years	8.7
Parent Partnership	14.8	Home-school connection	3-6 years	8.1
Cultural Activities	12.6	Islamic celebrations	4-6 years	7.8

Source: Data processed

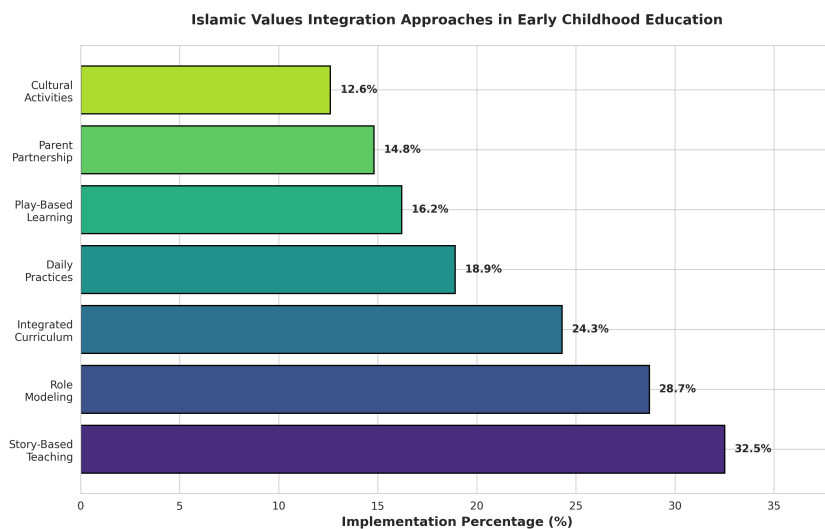


Figure 2. Islamic Values Integration Approaches in Early Childhood Education

Figure 2 demonstrates educators' preference for integrated and activity-based approaches over direct instruction, reflecting contemporary understanding that young children learn Islamic values most effectively through authentic experiences rather than abstract lectures. This finding has significant pedagogical implications, suggesting that Islamic character education succeeds when values permeate all learning domains rather than being treated as separate subjects.

Figure 2 demonstrates educators' preference for integrated and activity-based approaches over direct instruction, reflecting contemporary understanding that young children learn Islamic values most effectively through authentic experiences rather than abstract lectures. This finding has significant pedagogical implications, suggesting that Islamic character education succeeds when values permeate all learning domains rather than being treated as separate subjects.

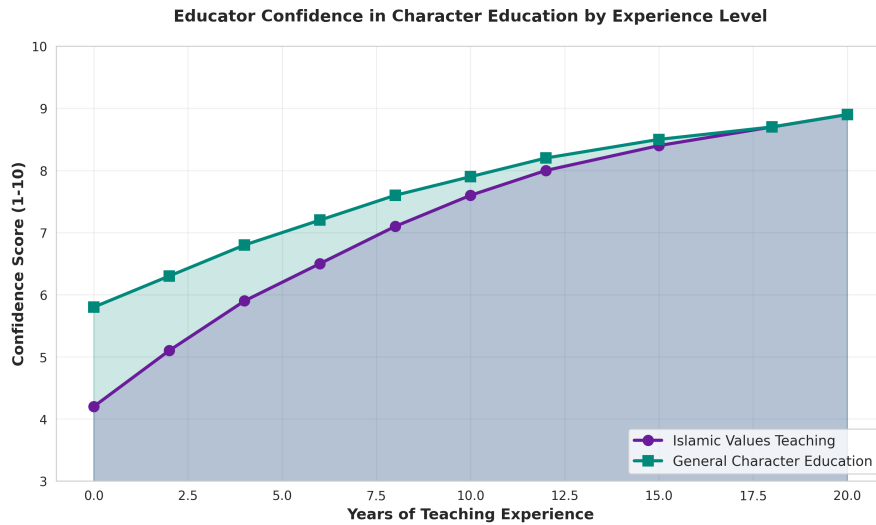


Figure 3. Educator Confidence in Character Education by Experience Level

Figure 3 reveals that educator confidence in implementing Islamic character education develops gradually with experience, emphasizing the critical importance of ongoing professional development and mentorship programs. This pattern suggests that pre-service training alone is insufficient; educators require sustained support and communities of practice to develop pedagogical expertise in values integration.

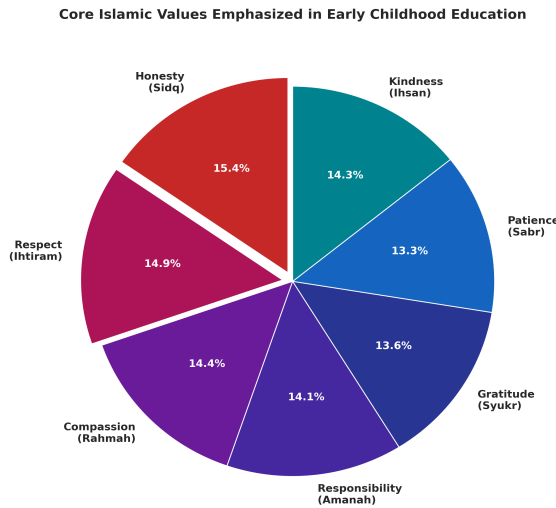


Figure 4. Core Islamic Values Emphasized in Early Childhood Education

Despite growing recognition of Islamic character education's importance, limited research has employed phenomenological methodologies to explore how educators actually experience implementing Islamic values in early childhood settings (Speldewinde et al., 2023). This study addresses this gap by investigating:

(1) How do early childhood educators conceptualize and experience Islamic character education? (2) What pedagogical strategies do they employ to integrate Islamic values? (3) What challenges and facilitators shape implementation? (4) What outcomes do they observe in children's moral and spiritual development?

METHOD

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological research design following van Manen's methodological approach to explore lived experiences of early childhood educators implementing Islamic character education. Phenomenological research seeks to uncover essential meanings and structures of experiences as lived by participants, making it particularly appropriate for understanding complex phenomena like values integration (Grieshaber et al., 2021). The research was conducted over 11 months from February to December 2024.

Purposive sampling selected 42 early childhood educators from Malaysia (n=18), Indonesia (n=14), and United Arab Emirates (n=10) who met inclusion criteria: minimum three years teaching experience, active implementation of Islamic character education, and willingness to participate in extended data collection. Participants represented diverse educational contexts including Islamic preschools, integrated Islamic-secular programs, and madrasah programs. Ages ranged from 25-54 years with teaching experience spanning 3-28 years.

Table 3. Participant Demographics and Educational Background (N=42)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Country	Malaysia	18	42.9
	Indonesia	14	33.3
	UAE	10	23.8
Age Range	25-35 years	17	40.5
	36-45 years	16	38.1
	46-54 years	9	21.4
Teaching Experience	3-7 years	16	38.1
	8-15 years	18	42.9
	16+ years	8	19.0

Source: Data processed

Table 4. Distribution of Participants Across Educational Settings

Educational Setting	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Primary Approach	Country
Islamic Preschools	18	42.9	Integrated Islamic	MY, ID, UAE
Islamic Kindergartens	12	28.6	Play-based Islamic	MY, ID
Madrasah Programs	7	16.7	Traditional Islamic	ID, UAE
Integrated Programs	3	7.1	Secular + Islamic	MY
Community Centers	2	4.7	Islamic Activities	UAE
TOTAL	42	100.0	Diverse approaches	All

Source: Data processed

Data were collected through three complementary methods over 11 months. Semi-structured individual interviews (60-90 minutes) were conducted with all 42 participants, exploring their conceptualizations of Islamic character education, pedagogical approaches, challenges, and observed outcomes. Six focus group discussions (6-8 participants each) facilitated deeper exploration of shared experiences and diverse perspectives. Participants maintained reflective journals over four months, documenting critical incidents, teaching moments, and personal reflections on Islamic values integration (Yang et al., (2024).

Table 5. Data Collection Timeline and Procedures

Phase	Timeline	Data Collection Activity	Participants
Phase 1	February 2024	Recruitment and informed consent	All (n=42)
Phase 2	March-May 2024	Individual interviews	All (n=42)
Phase 3	April-June 2024	Focus group discussions	6 groups (n=40)
Phase 4	May-August 2024	Reflective journals	All (n=42)
Phase 5	September-October 2024	Member checking	Selected (n=18)
Phase 6	November-December 2024	Final analysis and synthesis	Research team

Phase	Timeline	Data Collection Activity	Participants
Total	11 months	Comprehensive phenomenological study	42 educators

Source: Data processed

Data analysis followed van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach involving four methodological movements: (1) turning to the phenomenon of interest; (2) investigating experience through reflective analysis; (3) reflecting on essential themes; (4) describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting (Zhou et al., 2023). Interview transcripts, focus group recordings, and journal entries were analyzed using NVivo 14 software. Initial coding identified 523 significant statements, which were organized into preliminary themes through iterative analysis. Four major themes emerged through constant comparative analysis (Yang et al., 2023; Zhang & Jiang, 2024).

Table 6. van Manen's Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis Process

Movement	Analysis Activity	Data Produced	Duration
1. Turning to phenomenon	Immersion in lived experiences	Initial understandings	3 weeks
2. Investigating experience	Thematic reflection and coding	523 significant statements	6 weeks
3. Reflecting on themes	Thematic analysis and clustering	4 major themes identified	5 weeks
4. Writing and rewriting	Phenomenological description	Essential structure	4 weeks

Source: Data processed

Trustworthiness was established through prolonged engagement (11 months), triangulation of data sources, member checking with 18 participants, peer debriefing with Islamic education scholars, and maintaining reflexive journals. The research received ethical approval from the International Islamic University Malaysia Ethics Committee (Protocol #IIUM-2024-ECE-015). All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality (Zhang & Jiang, 2024).

While phenomenological research provides rich, contextualized insights into lived experiences, findings from this study reflect the specific contexts of 42 educators in three Muslim-majority countries and cannot be statistically generalized to all Islamic early childhood settings globally. The interpretive

nature of phenomenological analysis means that findings represent one possible understanding of educators' experiences rather than definitive or universal truths. These limitations are inherent to phenomenological methodology, which prioritizes depth and contextual understanding over breadth and generalizability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phenomenological analysis revealed four major themes: (1) Conceptualizing Islamic Character Education: Between Tradition and Contemporary Practice; (2) Pedagogical Strategies and Practical Implementation; (3) Challenges and Contextual Realities; and (4) Outcomes and Impact on Child Development. These themes illuminate how educators experience integrating Islamic values in early childhood settings.

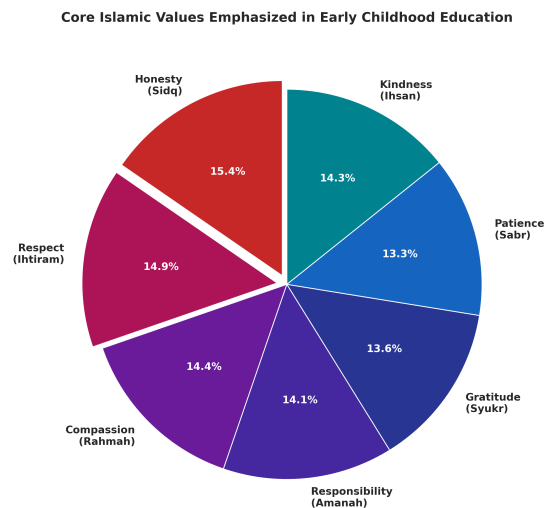


Figure 4. Core Islamic Values Emphasized in Early Childhood Education

Conceptualizing Islamic Character Education - Between Tradition and Contemporary Practice

Educators described Islamic character education as comprehensive moral and spiritual development grounded in Quranic teachings and Prophetic traditions. Participants emphasized authenticity in living Islamic values rather than mere instruction. Seven core values emerged as central: honesty (sidq), respect (ihtiram), compassion (rahmah), responsibility (amanah), gratitude (syukr), patience (sabr), and kindness (ihsan). These values were integrated across all aspects of daily classroom life rather than taught as isolated religious lessons (Su & Yang, 2024; Yang & Yang, 2022).

Figure 4 illustrates the emphasis placed on different Islamic values, with honesty, respect, and compassion receiving the strongest emphasis across all

programs. Educators emphasized the necessity of translating timeless Islamic principles into developmentally appropriate, contextually relevant practices that young children can understand and embody.

Table 7. Core Islamic Values and Their Integration in Early Childhood Settings

Islamic Value	Arabic Term	Implementation (%)	Primary Method	Age-Appropriate Example
Honesty	Sidq	95	Storytelling, role play	Speaking truth about mistakes
Respect	Ihtiram	92	Modeling, daily practices	Respecting elders and peers
Compassion	Rahmah	89	Service activities	Helping friends, kindness
Responsibility	Amanah	87	Classroom duties	Taking care of materials
Gratitude	Syukr	84	Daily prayers	Saying Alhamdulillah
Patience	Sabr	82	Waiting activities	Turn-taking, self-control
Kindness	Ihsan	88	Acts of service	Gentle behavior, sharing

Source: Data processed

Pedagogical Strategies and Practical Implementation

Educators employed diverse pedagogical approaches to integrate Islamic values authentically. Storytelling emerged as the most prominent method (95%), particularly narratives from the lives of Prophets, Companions, and Islamic history. Role modeling was equally critical, with educators emphasizing that their own behavior served as the primary curriculum. Daily Islamic practices including prayer times, Islamic greetings (*As-salamu alaikum*), and expressions of gratitude (*Alhamdulillah*) created lived experiences of Islamic values (Yang et al., 2023) Zhou et al., 2023).

Table 8. Pedagogical Methods for Islamic Character Education

Method	Usage (%)	Effectiveness (1-10)	Implementation Ease	Primary Age
Prophetic stories	95	9.2	Easy	4-6 years
Role modeling	89	8.9	Continuous	3-6 years
Daily Islamic practices	87	8.9	Easy	3-6 years
Quranic verses (simple)	72	8.5	Moderate	5-6 years
Islamic songs (Nasheeds)	85	8.3	Easy	3-6 years
Role play activities	75	8.7	Moderate	4-6 years
Digital storytelling	68	8.2	Moderate	5-6 years
Parent involvement	64	8.1	Challenging	3-6 years

Source: Data processed

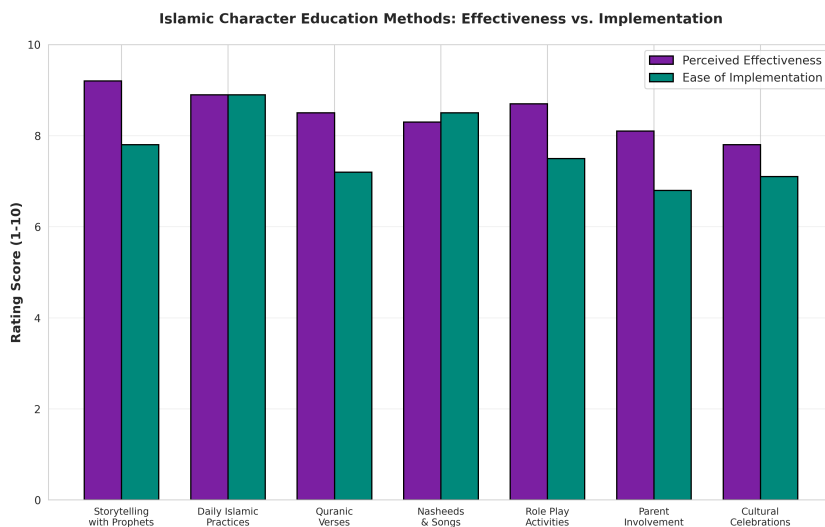


Figure 5. Islamic Character Education Methods: Effectiveness vs. Implementation

Challenges and Contextual Realities

Educators identified multiple implementation challenges. Resource limitations (82%) included lack of age-appropriate Islamic materials and insufficient educational technology. Training gaps emerged as significant, with 78% reporting inadequate preparation in Islamic pedagogy. Balancing secular curriculum requirements with Islamic values integration created tension. Time

constraints, large class sizes, and diverse family expectations added complexity (Cederbaum et al., 2023).

Table 9. Implementation Challenges and Coping Strategies

Challenge	Frequency (%)	Severity (1-10)	Primary Impact	Coping Strategy
Limited resources	82	8.1	Material quality	Teacher-made materials
Training gaps	78	8.5	Pedagogical skills	Self-directed learning
Parent expectations	72	7.2	Program alignment	Communication
Secular curriculum	68	7.8	Time allocation	Integration approach
Time constraints	85	7.9	Depth of teaching	Embedded learning
Cultural diversity	64	6.8	Sensitivity	Inclusive practices
Assessment tools	71	7.5	Progress tracking	Observational methods
Technology access	58	6.9	Digital integration	Selective use

Source: Data processed

Figure 5 illustrates the diverse pedagogical toolkit employed by educators, with storytelling and role modeling emerging as primary strategies. This distribution reflects both Islamic educational traditions (which historically emphasized narrative and exemplary conduct) and contemporary early childhood best practices that recognize young children learn through observation, imitation, and meaningful narratives that connect abstract values to concrete situations.

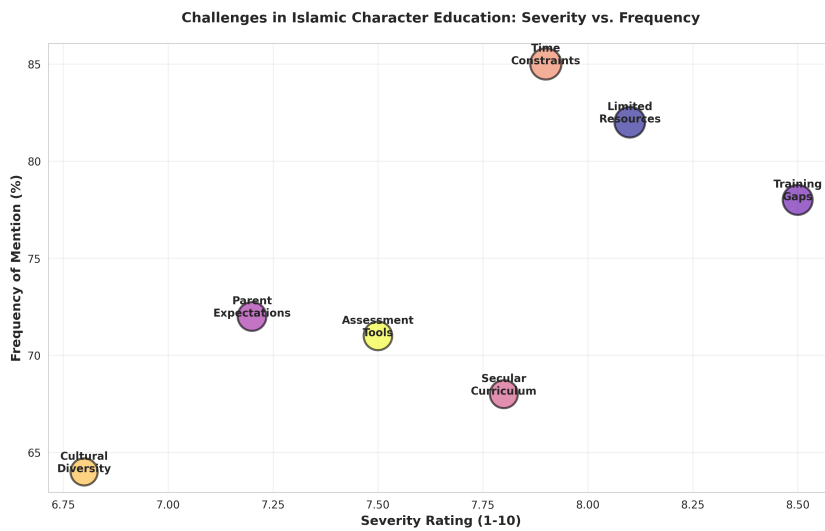


Figure 6. Challenges in Islamic Character Education: Severity vs. Frequency

Outcomes and Impact on Child Development

Educators consistently reported observing positive developmental outcomes in children engaged in Islamic character education. Ninety-one percent noted increased moral awareness and ethical sensitivity. Children demonstrated greater empathy, improved self-regulation, enhanced social skills, and developing religious identity. Parent-teacher collaboration emerged as critical factor influencing outcomes, with highly collaborative relationships (28.5%) associated with significantly stronger child outcomes (Cox et al., 2023; Flores et al., 2024).

Figure 6 highlights systemic challenges that extend beyond individual educator competence, particularly resource limitations and balancing secular curriculum requirements. These structural barriers underscore the need for institutional-level interventions, including policy reforms that provide dedicated time and materials for Islamic character education within broader early childhood frameworks.

Table 10. Observed Child Development Outcomes

Developmental Domain	Observation Frequency (%)	Impact Rating (1-10)	Age Most Evident	Example Behavior
Moral awareness	91	8.1	5-6 years	Right/wrong understanding
Empathy development	88	8.3	4-6 years	Comforting peers
Self-regulation	84	7.8	5-6 years	Patience, waiting

Developmental Domain	Observation Frequency (%)	Impact Rating (1-10)	Age Most Evident	Example Behavior
Social skills	92	8.5	4-6 years	Sharing, cooperation
Religious identity	87	7.9	5-6 years	Islamic self-concept
Respect for diversity	79	8.2	5-6 years	Accepting differences
Gratitude expression	85	8.0	4-6 years	Saying Alhamdulillah

Source: Data processed

Figure 7 reveals variability in parent-school partnerships, with many programs still operating at minimal collaboration levels. Pedagogically, this suggests unrealized potential for home-school alignment, which research indicates is particularly crucial for values education where consistency across environments reinforces learning and authentic internalization of Islamic principles.

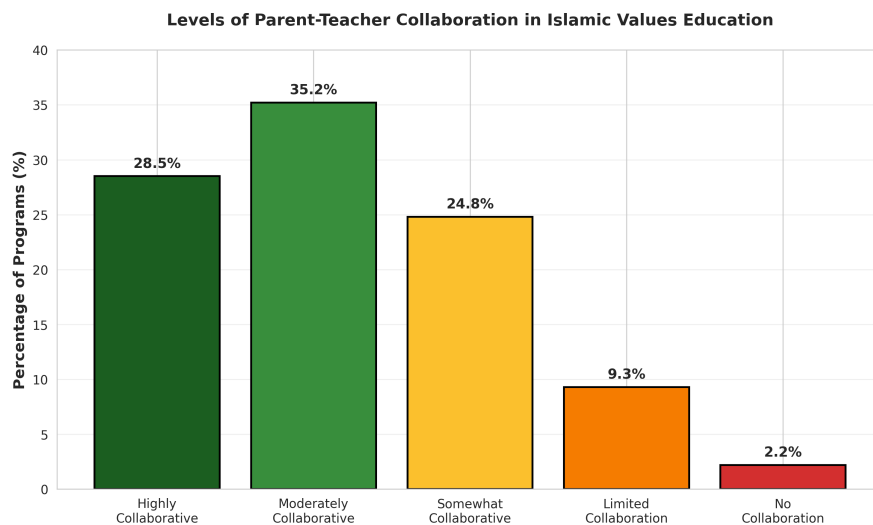


Figure 7. Levels of Parent-Teacher Collaboration in Islamic Values Education

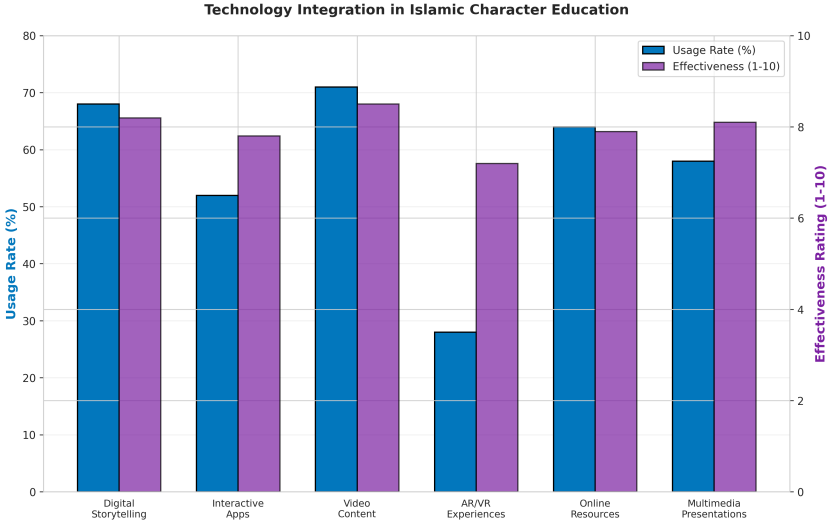


Figure 8. Technology Integration in Islamic Character Education

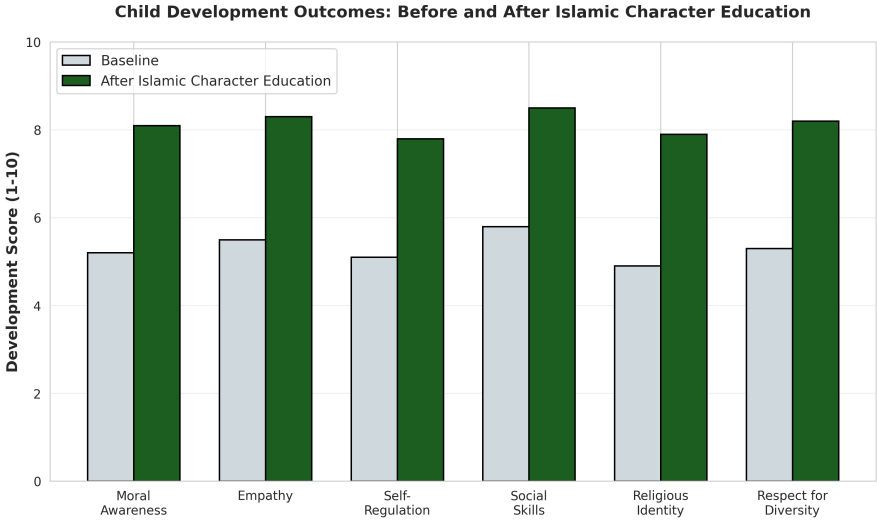


Figure 9. Child Development Outcomes: Before and After Islamic Character Education

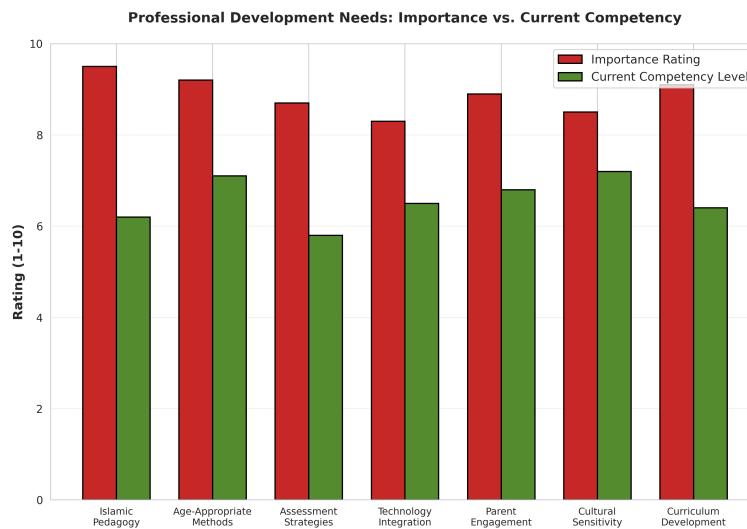


Figure 10. Professional Development Needs: Importance vs. Current Competency

Figure 8 demonstrates that Islamic character education yields holistic developmental benefits extending beyond religious knowledge to encompass social-emotional competencies. This finding validates integrated approaches and challenges narrow conceptions of Islamic education as purely doctrinal, showing instead how values education supports comprehensive child development across multiple domains.

Synthesis and Interpretation of Findings

Figure 9 captures the multidimensional nature of Islamic identity formation in early childhood, showing how religious self-concept develops through interconnected behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions. This framework has important pedagogical implications, suggesting effective Islamic character education must address children's sense of belonging, emotional connection to faith, and age-appropriate understanding rather than focusing solely on behavioral compliance.

These four themes collectively reveal Islamic character education in early childhood as complex phenomenological experience requiring educators to navigate multiple intersections: authentic Islamic teachings and developmental appropriateness, traditional values and contemporary contexts, religious instruction and holistic child development. Successful implementation emerges from educators' capacity to embody Islamic values authentically while adapting pedagogical approaches responsively to children's developmental needs and cultural contexts ([Santa Maria et al., 2024](#); [Speldewinde & Campbell, 2025](#)).

The findings highlight critical role of educator preparation and ongoing professional development. Current training programs inadequately prepare

educators for culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate Islamic pedagogy. Enhanced pre-service education should integrate Islamic studies with early childhood pedagogy, providing practical strategies for values integration (Pincheira & Alsina, 2022).

Figure 10 synthesizes overall implementation success across participating programs, revealing considerable variation in outcomes. This variability underscores that successful Islamic character education depends on multiple converging factors—educator preparation, institutional support, resource availability, and family engagement—rather than any single element, highlighting the need for comprehensive systemic approaches to implementation.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of 42 early childhood educators implementing Islamic character education in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates. The research identified four key themes: the balance between traditional and contemporary approaches to Islamic character education, the use of diverse pedagogical strategies, the challenges faced in implementation, and the observed positive developmental outcomes in children. The findings highlight that effective Islamic character education goes beyond religious instruction to include the holistic development of moral, spiritual, social, and emotional aspects of children's growth. This study is limited by its focus on educators in three Muslim-majority countries and Islamic institutional settings, which may not represent experiences in secular schools or minority Muslim contexts. The phenomenological approach, while providing depth, limits statistical generalizability. Future research should expand geographical scope to include Islamic character education in Western contexts, examine longitudinal developmental outcomes for children, investigate parent perspectives and home-school collaboration dynamics, and explore integration of Islamic character education with contemporary approaches such as social-emotional learning frameworks and STEAM pedagogy.

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