

Integrative Islamic Religious Education as a Transformational Pathway to Sustainable Character and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals have placed education at the center of global efforts to build a more equitable and sustainable world, yet much of the discourse still treats sustainability as a cognitive and policy matter, leaving its moral and spiritual foundations underdeveloped. Within this gap, Islamic Religious Education holds considerable but insufficiently theorized potential, since existing studies tend to affirm the correspondence between Islamic values and sustainability without explaining how it becomes educationally consequential. This study aims to reconstruct how Integrative Islamic Religious Education can serve as a strategic framework for embedding sustainability values within character education. Employing a qualitative library research design through a systematic library review, it analyzes peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2015 and 2025 using thematic content analysis. The findings show that integration operates not by adding new content but through value internalization, curriculum contextualization, and experiential learning, in which principles such as *'adl* (justice), *amanah* (responsibility), *rahmah* (compassion), and *khalifah fil ardh* (stewardship of the earth) are aligned with sustainability as shared moral commitments rather than imposed secular targets. The analysis locates integration at the axiological rather than the epistemological level and identifies pedagogy as the decisive mechanism that translates values into sustainable character. The principal implication concerns transformational education and learning, since the study frames Islamic ethical values as interpretive frames through which learners are reoriented toward sustainability at the level of disposition and worldview, offering a religiously grounded model of transformational pedagogy that now awaits empirical testing.

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INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, have become a global framework for promoting inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development across social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Syarifah et al., 2025). Education occupies a central position within this agenda, particularly through SDG 4, which emphasizes inclusive and quality education that fosters lifelong learning opportunities for all. Beyond cognitive achievement, contemporary educational discourse increasingly highlights character formation, ethical responsibility, environmental awareness, and social justice as essential components of sustainable development. In this regard, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) possesses significant potential to contribute to the realization of the SDGs by cultivating values such as responsibility (*amanah*), justice (*'adl*), moderation (*wasatiyyah*), environmental stewardship (*khalifah fil ardh*), and social solidarity (*ukhawah*) (Aboukhousa et al., 2025). These values align closely with the principles of sustainable development and provide a moral foundation for shaping responsible global citizens (Efendi et al., 2025; Syarifah et al., 2025).

A growing body of scholarship has examined how sustainability values can be integrated into religious and character education (Giyarsi et al., 2025; Switri et al., 2025; Taufik & Sukandar, 2026). This work suggests that education for sustainable development becomes more effective when it is joined to the ethical and spiritual dimensions that shape learners' attitudes and behaviors (Adeoye, 2026; Khan & Haneef, 2022). Within Islamic education specifically, scholars have studied the relationship between Islamic teachings and sustainable development through environmental ethics, social responsibility, and peace-building (Pamungkas, 2024; Rahman et al., 2025), while others have treated character education as a strategic instrument for strengthening moral competence and civic engagement (Nuhrobin, 2025; Rizqi et al., 2024). More recently, the notion of integrative Islamic Religious Education has emerged as an approach that connects religious knowledge with contemporary challenges such as globalization, technological change, and environmental sustainability (Karomah & Hariyadi, 2025; Kassymova et al., 2025; Saputri, 2025). Collectively, these studies indicate that Islamic educational values can support sustainable development by fostering holistic human development across intellectual, spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions (Fatimah et al., 2025; Malik et al., 2025).

Despite this accumulation of work, the literature reveals tension rather than consensus, and the tension itself exposes the gap. A constructive current treats the alignment between Islamic ethics and the SDGs as natural and mutually reinforcing, presenting religious education as a ready vehicle for sustainability (Efendi et al., 2025; Fajri, 2024; Sapitri et al., 2025). A more cautious current warns that this alignment often remains rhetorical, constrained by teacher capacity, curricular guidance, and institutional readiness, so that integration risks staying symbolic rather than substantive (Murtyaningsih et al., 2025; Switri et al., 2025; Taufik & Sukandar, 2026). Beneath this unresolved debate lies a structural shortcoming, since existing studies tend to treat Education for Sustainable Development, character education, and Islamic Religious Education as parallel lanes that rarely converge into a single conceptual framework, concentrating on environmental awareness or moral development in isolation (Basyiroh et al., 2024; Suhayib & Ansyari, 2023). What remains missing, in particular, is a theoretical synthesis that explains the mechanisms through which Islamic educational values are translated into sustainable character capable of supporting global development goals. The relationship among integrative Islamic Religious Education, sustainable character education, and SDG achievement therefore remains underexplored and warrants systematic investigation.

This study responds to that gap by offering a synthesis rather than another parallel account, and its novelty lies in three connected moves. Rather than cataloguing further correspondences between Islamic values and the SDGs, it reconstructs how those correspondences become educationally consequential, locating integration at the level of shared moral commitment rather than doctrinal subordination, and identifying pedagogy as the mechanism that carries values into character (Mawaridah, 2025; Suhayib & Ansyari, 2023). In doing so, it treats Integrative IRE not as a settled accomplishment but as a coherent conceptual model whose realization is contingent, an analytic stance that distinguishes it from the largely affirmative tone of prior work (Fathurrohman & Abbas, 2026; Rifdillah, 2025). These reframing positions the study as a theoretical contribution to a field that has so far accumulated parallels without explaining their educational mechanism (Sahlan & Djazilan, 2025; Schliesser, 2023).

The objective of this study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Integrative Islamic Religious Education can serve as a strategic framework for embedding sustainability values within character education. The urgency of this objective follows from a contemporary expectation that educational institutions produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also ethically responsible and socially conscious, a demand that purely cognitive or policy-driven models of sustainability have struggled to meet. By synthesizing scholarship on Islamic education, sustainable development, and character formation, the study argues that Integrative IRE contributes to the achievement of the SDGs by fostering sustainable character traits such as responsibility, environmental awareness, social justice, empathy, and ethical

leadership, traits indispensable for preparing individuals capable of sustaining their own societies. It thereby also speaks to the wider discourse on transformational education and learning, since it understands Islamic ethical values less as content to be acquired than as interpretive frames through which learners are reoriented toward sustainability. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: the first section presents the research method; the second examines the conceptual relationship between Integrative IRE and the SDGs; the third analyzes the integration of SDG values within sustainable character education and its implications for practice; and the final section concludes by drawing together the contributions and proposing directions for future research.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative library research design conducted within an interpretive paradigm, a choice dictated by the nature of its object. Because the inquiry concerns a body of ideas, namely the conceptual relationship among Integrative Islamic Religious Education, the Sustainable Development Goals, and sustainable character education, rather than a behavior to be measured or a population to be sampled, the appropriate evidentiary base is published scholarship treated as the unit of analysis. The study therefore reconstructs and positions a concept against the scholarly conversation rather than generating empirical generalizations. To make the selection of that scholarship systematic and traceable, the review adapted the established logic of systematic literature searching, moving through the connected stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion, though it does so descriptively rather than as a formal meta-analytic protocol.

The search strategy drew on five academic databases selected to balance citation quality with disciplinary breadth: Scopus and Web of Science for indexed and peer-reviewed coverage, Dimensions and Crossref for wider bibliographic reach, and Google Scholar to capture relevant work not yet indexed in the first two. The retrieval used thematically grouped keyword sets combining the vocabularies of Islamic education, sustainability, and character formation, including the terms "Islamic Religious Education," "Integrative Islamic Education," "Sustainable Development Goals," "Education for Sustainable Development," "Character Education," and "Sustainable Character," joined through Boolean operators. The window was restricted to works published between 2015 and 2025, taking the adoption of the SDGs in 2015 as the natural starting point, and retrieval was limited to publications in English or Indonesian.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied throughout the selection process. Eligible records were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and conference proceedings that substantively addressed the intersection of Islamic education, sustainability, and character development; records were excluded when they fell outside the thematic scope, duplicated an already retrieved item, lacked peer review, or engaged the keywords only incidentally without analytic treatment of the theme. Screening proceeded first by title and abstract to remove clearly irrelevant records, and then by full-text assessment to confirm that each retained source contributed directly to the conceptual questions guiding the review. The criteria and the safeguards adopted to secure trustworthiness are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Analytical Phases of the Library Research

Phase	Stage	Procedure	Output
1	Familiarization	Repeated reading of the retained corpus to grasp scope and argument	An informed overview of the literature
2	Open coding	Labeling recurring concepts, claims, and value-goal pairings	An initial code inventory
3	Categorization	Grouping codes into thematic clusters	Coherent analytic categories
4	Theoretical synthesis	Reconstructing clusters into an integrative argument	The conceptual model and findings

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the cited literature.

Trustworthiness was pursued through three complementary safeguards summarized in **Table 2**. Source triangulation was achieved by reading each claim against perspectives drawn from several disciplines, including Islamic education, educational philosophy, sustainability studies, and character education, so that no single strand of scholarship determined the synthesis on its own. An audit trail was maintained through the documented search strategy and the recorded inclusion and exclusion decisions, which together make the path from identification to inclusion reconstructable by a reader. Interpretive consistency was preserved by returning repeatedly to the core sources during synthesis, ensuring that the reconstructed argument remained accountable to what the literature actually claims rather than drifting into assertion.

Table 2. Selection Criteria and Trustworthiness Measures

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Triangulation	Audit Trail
Peer-reviewed articles, books, and proceedings (2015 to 2025) on Islamic education, sustainability, and character	Off-topic, duplicated, non-peer-reviewed, or incidental keyword matches	Cross-disciplinary reading across Islamic education, philosophy, sustainability, and character studies	Documented search strategy and recorded selection decisions

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the cited literature.

Finally, the design carries limitations that should be stated plainly. As a conceptual and library-based study, it reconstructs and positions ideas rather than testing them empirically, so its claims about the contribution of Integrative IRE to the SDGs remain analytic rather than verified outcomes in practice. The reliance on English and Indonesian sources within a single decade may also have excluded relevant scholarship in other languages or earlier foundational work. These constraints do not weaken the conceptual contribution, but they do mark the boundary beyond which empirical investigation, rather than further synthesis, would be required.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Intrinsic Alignment between Islamic Values and the SDGs

The reviewed corpus converges on a foundational claim that frames the entire analysis: the relationship between Integrative Islamic Religious Education and the Sustainable Development Goals rests on a paradigm shift away from fragmented doctrinal instruction toward a holistic, value-driven model integrating spiritual, ethical, and socio-environmental dimensions. Across the literature, Integrative IRE is characterized less as a body of content to be transmitted than as a framework that forms learners' worldview, moral consciousness, and sense of social responsibility (Efendi et al., 2025; Karomah & Hariyadi, 2025). Within this reading, education is not a purely cognitive enterprise but a process of human formation oriented toward *insan kamil*, a trajectory that maps onto the multidimensional ambition of the SDGs rather than standing apart from it (Aboukhousa et al., 2025; Khan & Haneef, 2022).

What gives this relationship analytic substance is the alignment between particular Islamic educational values and particular development goals, a correspondence that recurs with notable consistency across the corpus. Several studies anchor environmental sustainability in the principle of *khalifah fil ardh*, the human vocation of stewardship over the earth, and read it as a religious grounding for SDG 13 and SDG 15 (Rahman et al., 2025; Sapitri et al., 2025). Others position *adl* (justice) and *musawah* (equality) as the moral basis for social equity and inclusion under SDG 1, SDG 5, and SDG 10, while *rahmah* (compassion) and *ukhrawah* (brotherhood) are read as resources for peace and strong institutions under SDG 16 (Fajri, 2024; Kassymova et al., 2025). The recurrence of this mapping across otherwise diverse studies is itself a finding, since it indicates that the corpus does not treat sustainability as an agenda imported from outside but as a set of commitments already latent in the normative vocabulary of Islamic education. **Table 3** consolidates this recurring correspondence.

Table 3. Conceptual Mapping between Integrative Islamic Religious Education and the Sustainable Development Goals

SDGs Dimension	Relevant SDGs	Islamic Educational Values	Educational Orientation in Integrative IRE
Social Justice	SDG 1, 5, 10	<i>‘Adl</i> (justice), <i>musawab</i> (equality)	Promoting fairness, inclusivity, and equity in learning practices
Quality Education	SDG 4	<i>Tarbiyah</i> , <i>ta’lim</i> , <i>taẓkiyah</i>	Holistic development of knowledge, attitude, and spiritual intelligence
Environmental Sustainability	SDG 12, 13, 15	<i>Khalifah fil ardh</i> (stewardship), <i>amanah</i>	Building ecological awareness and responsible environmental behavior
Peace and Strong Institutions	SDG 16	<i>Rahmah</i> (compassion), <i>ukhuwah</i> (brotherhood)	Developing ethical conduct, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence
Partnership for Goals	SDG 17	<i>Ta’awun</i> (cooperation), <i>shura</i> (consultation)	Encouraging collaboration, teamwork, and collective problem-solving

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the cited literature.

Table 3 does more than catalogue parallels, since its analytic value lies in what the pattern of pairing reveals about the underlying logic of integration. Reading down the columns, each development dimension finds not a single value but a cluster, which suggests that the corpus conceives the relationship as thick rather than one to one, with sustainability goals supported by mutually reinforcing ethical commitments rather than isolated proof-texts. The mapping also reveals an asymmetry worth naming, since environmental and justice dimensions attract dense theological anchoring whereas partnership and institutional goals remain comparatively thin, hinting that the literature is more confident grounding moral than structural dimensions of the SDGs. This unevenness matters, because it shows that the alignment, however consistent, is selective rather than total. The table therefore functions less as proof of seamless convergence than as a diagnostic of where Islamic educational discourse has, and has not yet, built its bridges to the global agenda.

Three Mechanisms of Value Integration

The second cluster of findings concerns how, in practice, SDG values enter Islamic learning. The corpus describes integration as operating through three interlocking mechanisms rather than as the addition of new subject matter: value internalization, curriculum contextualization, and experiential learning (Efendi et al., 2025; Giyarsi et al., 2025; Switri et al., 2025). At the level of internalization, sustainability principles are not taught as standalone content but reinterpreted theologically, so that environmental responsibility, equity, peacebuilding, and global citizenship are presented as expressions of existing Islamic ethical commitments rather than as competing secular priorities (Syarifah et al., 2025).

At the curricular level, the literature reports that integration proceeds through thematic and contextual design in which Islamic concepts are connected to concrete global problems. The principle of *khalifah fil ardh* is mobilized to internalize ecological responsibility, *‘adl* is linked to questions of social inequality, and *rahmah* together with *ukhuwah* is drawn into peace and citizenship education, transforming Islamic Religious Education from a doctrinal subject into a problem-based encounter with contemporary challenges (Basyiroh et al., 2024; Rahman et al., 2025). The pedagogical mechanism completes the sequence, as studies repeatedly identify project-based learning, reflective practice, and community engagement as the means by which internalized values are carried into action, with learners participating in environmental conservation, social service, and collaborative problem-solving (Murtyaningsih et al., 2025; Nuhrodi, 2025).

Synthesizing these mechanisms, the corpus yields a conceptual model in which integration moves through a connected sequence rather than a set of isolated activities, as represented in **Figure 1**.

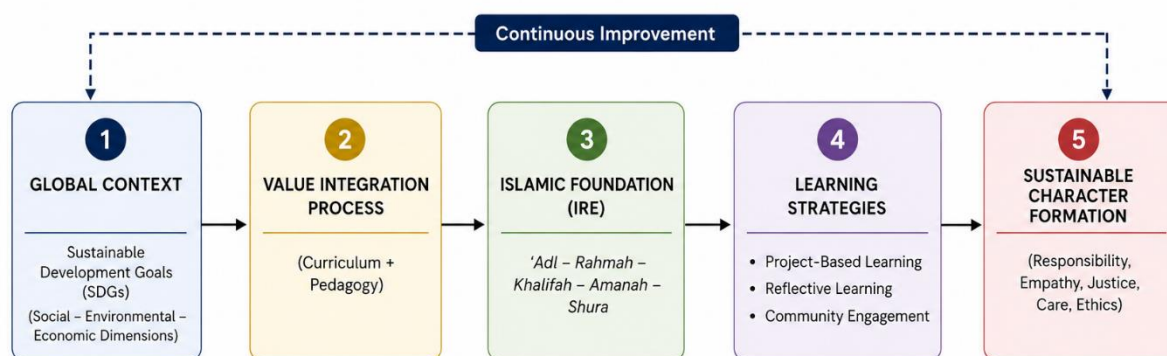


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of SDG Integration in Integrative Islamic Religious Education for Sustainable Character Development

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the cited literature.

Figure 1 advances a claim rather than merely arranging the findings, since its vertical logic asserts that sustainable character is an outcome contingent on the integrity of every preceding stage. The global context of the SDGs enters through a value integration process, is grounded in an Islamic foundation of *'adl*, *rahmah*, *khalifah*, *amanah*, and *shura*, and is enacted through learning strategies before issuing in character expressed as responsibility, empathy, justice, care, and ethics. The model's most consequential feature is the dashed loop of continuous improvement, which converts a linear pipeline into a recursive system in which formed character feeds back to deepen the integration of values. Read diagnostically, the figure implies that weakness at any layer, a shallow theological foundation or a token pedagogy, propagates downward and compromises the final outcome. Integration, on this reading, is a structural achievement rather than the sum of discrete activities, a proposition the Discussion tests against the corpus's own admissions of practical fragility.

Four Pathways of Contribution to the SDGs

The third theme addresses the contribution itself, which the corpus locates in the transformation of learners' understanding, values, and behavioral orientation toward sustainability. Four contributions recur across the literature. The first is the internalization of sustainability-oriented values, where principles such as *'adl*, *amanah*, *rahmah*, and *khalifah fil ardh* are aligned with equity, environmental protection, and global responsibility, so that sustainability is experienced by learners as a moral and religious obligation rather than an external directive (Aboukhousa et al., 2025; Fajri, 2024). The second is the formation of sustainable character as a mediating outcome, since the literature associates integrative Islamic learning with heightened empathy, ethical awareness, environmental responsibility, cooperation, and social concern, traits the corpus connects to SDG 4, SDG 10, SDG 13, and SDG 16 (Sapitri et al., 2025; Switri et al., 2025).

The third contribution lies in sustainability-oriented learning practices, where experiential pedagogies are reported to develop critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving while reinforcing Islamic ethical commitments, so that learners become not only knowledgeable about sustainability but capable of acting on it in context-sensitive ways (Malik et al., 2025; Nuhrodin, 2025). The fourth is broader and more conditional, as several authors argue that sustainable development cannot be secured through policy and technology alone but requires ethical transformation at the individual and collective levels, and they position Integrative IRE as a candidate source of that ethical foundation (Khan & Haneef, 2022; Schliesser, 2023). Taken together, the corpus presents these four contributions not as established empirical effects but as a coherent and recurring account of how Islamic education might translate moral commitment into action on global development, an account the Discussion subjects to closer scrutiny.

Discussion

The central argument of this discussion is that the value of Integrative Islamic Religious Education for the Sustainable Development Goals lies not in the abundance of parallels between Islamic ethics and global targets, which the Result has already documented, but in the conditions under which those parallels become educationally consequential. A correspondence between *‘adl* and equity, or between *khalifah fil ardh* and ecological responsibility, is conceptually elegant, yet elegance at the level of doctrine does not by itself transform a learner. The literature read here is most useful precisely where it allows that gap to be examined rather than assumed away, and it is around that gap that the following issues are organized.

The first tension concerns the distance between conceptual coherence and institutional realization. The reviewed studies present integration as a smooth alignment of Islamic values with development goals, yet several of the same sources concede that this alignment frequently remains rhetorical, dependent on teacher capacity, curricular guidance, and institutional readiness that are unevenly distributed (Murtyaningsih et al., 2025; Switri et al., 2025). The existing literature has tended to celebrate the normative fit while underexamining the implementation deficit. This study extends that conversation by treating the fit not as evidence of success but as a hypothesis whose realization is contingent, which reframes the coherence so often praised in the corpus as a starting condition rather than an achievement.

The second issue positions Integrative IRE within the longstanding debate over how Islamic education should relate to non-religious knowledge, a debate that has oscillated between the Islamization of knowledge and the integration of knowledge. Where the Islamization paradigm seeks to subordinate external frameworks to revealed categories, the integrative reading evidenced in this corpus operates differently, aligning Islamic ethics with the SDGs at the level of shared moral commitment rather than epistemic subordination (Efendi et al., 2025; Khan & Haneef, 2022). This study contributes to that debate by showing that the corpus locates integration axiologically, in the domain of values, rather than epistemologically, which explains why the SDGs can be absorbed without the doctrinal friction that the Islamization paradigm would predict.

Table 4. Theoretical Contribution of the Study

Body of Literature	What It Already Holds	How This Study Extends or Challenges It
Islamic education and the SDGs	Islamic values correspond closely to development goals	Reframes the correspondence as a contingent hypothesis, not a settled achievement
Islamization versus integration of knowledge	Integration debated mainly at the epistemological level	Relocates integration to the axiological level, dissolving the doctrinal friction
Character education and pedagogy	Experiential learning supports value formation	Identifies pedagogy as the decisive load-bearing mechanism, not a supporting preference
Education for Sustainable Development	Ethical transformation underpins sustainability	Supplies a religious-ethical foundation while flagging its unverified empirical status

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the cited literature.

The third issue concerns the mechanism that actually carries values into character, which the corpus repeatedly identifies as experiential and pedagogical rather than doctrinal. The literature converges on project-based learning, reflective practice, and community engagement as the means by which abstract commitments become dispositions (Malik et al., 2025; Nuhrodin et al., 2025; Sapitri et al., 2025). What the existing scholarship asserts but rarely theorizes is why pedagogy, rather than content, is decisive. This study advances the point by arguing that character forms through repeated ethical practice, so that the pedagogical layer is not an instructional preference but the load-bearing mechanism of the whole model, the stage at which integration either becomes behavioral or collapses into rhetoric. Drawing these issues together, the theoretical contribution of this study can be stated against the bodies of literature it engages, as set out in **Table 4**.

Read across its rows, **Table 4** clarifies that this study does not add another parallel to an already crowded list but redistributes the weight of the argument, moving the decisive questions from doctrine to realization, from epistemology to axiology, and from content to pedagogy. Yet the same honesty that motivates these claims requires their limits to be named. The contribution

is interpretive rather than empirical: it offers a framework and a set of propositions about how Integrative IRE might shape character toward the SDGs, not evidence that it has done so in measurable terms. The risk that integration remains symbolic, that teacher capacity lags, and that institutional support is uneven are not external caveats but conditions internal to whether the model works at all, and only field research can establish which conditions hold.

Beyond these qualifications, the most consequential implication of the analysis is what it contributes to the wider discourse on transformational education and learning. Where transformational learning theory locates change in the critical revision of the frames through which learners interpret experience, this study identifies an Islamic-ethical route to that same transformation, one in which values such as *amanah*, *‘adl*, and *khalifah fil ardh* function not as content to be acquired but as interpretive frames to be inhabited and enacted. The specific contribution is to show that Integrative IRE can operate as a transformational pedagogy in which sustainability is internalized through a recursive movement from theological grounding to lived practice and back, so that the learner is not merely informed about global goals but reoriented toward them at the level of disposition and worldview. In this sense the study offers the field a religiously grounded model of transformational education, in which character formation and sustainability commitment are produced together rather than taught in sequence, and which now stands as a framework awaiting empirical test.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that Integrative Islamic Religious Education contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals not through the mere correspondence between Islamic ethics and global targets but through the conditions under which that correspondence becomes educationally consequential. Reconstructing the literature, the analysis locates integration at the axiological rather than the epistemological level, so that values such as *‘adl*, *amanah*, *rahmah*, and *khalifah fil ardh* are aligned with sustainability as shared moral commitments rather than imposed secular priorities, and it identifies pedagogy, expressed through value internalization, curriculum contextualization, and experiential learning, as the decisive mechanism by which those commitments are carried into sustainable character. The framework therefore moves from theological grounding through contextualized curriculum to lived practice, and back again through a recursive loop in which formed character deepens the integration of values. These claims remain interpretive rather than empirically verified, and their realization is contingent on teacher capacity, curricular guidance, and institutional readiness that field research alone can establish, which marks the boundary where synthesis must give way to investigation. Understood in this way, Integrative Islamic Religious Education stands less as a settled accomplishment than as a transformational framework in which character and sustainability are formed together, offered to the field as a proposition awaiting empirical test.

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