



Hidden Curriculum in Islamic Religious Education: Religious Character and Responsibility through School Ecosystem Interconnection

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Abstract

The formation of religious character and a sense of responsibility in students is a challenge for education amid rapid social dynamics and technological developments. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has a strategic role in internalizing Islamic values, but its learning tends to be cognitive and formal in nature. This study aims to analyze the role of the hidden curriculum of IRE in shaping the religious character and responsibility of students and to formulate a conceptual model of the hidden curriculum of IRE based on an interconnective school ecosystem. Using a qualitative approach, this study employed a case study method at integrated Islamic elementary school. Data collection was conducted through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. The collected data were then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The results of the study explain that the hidden curriculum of PAI is internalized through religious school culture, educator role models, daily habits, and ethical social interactions. Religious values and responsibility are internalized through contextual and continuous learning experiences. This study produced a conceptual model of the hidden curriculum of PAI based on an interconnective school ecosystem, which emphasizes that the character building of students is the result of the integration of the school environment, implicit value education practices, and a continuous internalization process.

Keywords: Hidden Curriculum, Religious Character, Responsibility, School Ecosystem

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INTRODUCTION

In line with the development of the times and technological advances, the rapid flow of unlimited information, and the dynamics of rapid social change, serious challenges have arisen in the world of education, particularly in the effort to shape the character of students in modern society (Alimah, 2020; Rokhimawan et al., 2025). The phenomenon of ethical degradation, weakening moral values, increasing individualistic behavior, and low awareness of social responsibility are indicators that education has not fully implemented character principles internally and sustainably (Arbués et al., 2025; Chowdhury, 2016; Pamungkas et al., 2025; Syed et al., 2024). This is reinforced by the results of research by Musyafa Fathoni, which contributes a new perspective on character education in minimizing bullying and preventing moral decline and juvenile delinquency in schools through a prophetic approach



(Fathoni et al., 2024), In addition, data from the Child Protection Commission (KPAI) in 2024 recorded 161 cases, with details of 31 cases of juvenile gang fights, 23 cases of gang fight victims, 36 victims of bullying, and 30 cases of victims of education policy (KPAI, 2025), which shows that the internalization of character values in the educational environment is still weak. This condition illustrates that intellectual intelligence alone is not enough to equip the younger generation to face the complexities of life, but needs to be balanced with character building rooted in moral and spiritual values (Ervina et al., 2025).

In this context, Islamic Religious Education has a strategic position as a means of internalizing the values contained in Islamic teachings and shaping the character of students (Aulia et al., 2025). However, the reality of IRE learning in the field is still dominated by a formal approach in the classroom, namely conventional methods or often still oriented towards cognitive achievement and mastery of teaching materials (Chimbo et al., 2026; Ramli et al., 2025). This condition means that learning has not been optimal in developing the affective and psychomotor domains of students (Aribah et al., 2025). This situation shows a significant difference between the normative objectives of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) that should be achieved and the learning practices that occur in the field (schools). Limited learning time allocation, normative learning approaches, and the suboptimal integration of Islamic values in various aspects of daily life have prevented the character-building process through IRE from achieving maximum results (Azizi et al., 2025).

This condition shows that the internalization of Islamic values cannot be entirely dependent on an explicit formal curriculum (Velly, 2021). Therefore, an alternative approach is needed to bridge the gap between formal learning and character building in the real lives of students. This is where the concept of the hidden curriculum becomes relevant. The hidden curriculum encompasses a set of values, norms, attitudes, and specific patterns of behavior that are indirectly transmitted through everyday educational experiences outside the written curriculum, such as school culture, teacher role models, patterns of social interaction, and habits that occur continuously outside of formal learning (Puspita Sari et al., 2023). Unlike the formal curriculum, the hidden curriculum works implicitly through the direct experiences of students, thus having great potential to instill religious values and attitudes of responsibility in a more contextual and meaningful way (Putri, 2023).

Religious character and responsibility are two fundamental values in character education. Religious character is not only interpreted as obedience to religious rituals, but is also reflected in moral attitudes, honesty, tolerance, and awareness of the relationship between humans and God and fellow humans (Joharsah, 2023). Meanwhile, the character trait of responsibility relates to an individual's ability to carry out obligations, make conscious decisions, and bear the consequences of their actions, both in the personal and social spheres (Farid, 2023). The strengthening of these two characteristics is an indicator of the successful formation of students' personalities as a whole. The optimization of the hidden IRE curriculum cannot be separated from the existence of an interconnective school ecosystem, which is an education system that emphasizes integration and collaboration between school elements, including teachers, students, institutional policies, school culture, and the surrounding environment (Subhan et al., 2025). In a school ecosystem that is interconnected and mutually influential, the process of internalizing Islamic values for success does not only depend on Islamic Education (IRE) teachers, but is the result of interaction and collaboration among all components of the school (Samsiah, 2025; Sefrina, 2025).

Although many studies have been conducted on the hidden curriculum and character education, most of them are still partial, focusing separately on the role of teacher role models or school culture. For example, research by Esti Rahma Pratiwi shows that school culture, habits, and role models at school can shape students' character (Pratiwi, 2017). On the other hand, studies on the school ecosystem generally focus on the learning climate and

academic achievement, without explicitly linking them to the hidden IRE curriculum as a mechanism for internalizing Islamic values. Nature schools provide flexible, participatory, and creativity-oriented learning that promotes independence, without linking it to the hidden curriculum in these schools (Hartati et al., 2025). There has not been much research that comprehensively examines the relationship between the hidden curriculum of Islamic Education and the interconnected school ecosystem in shaping religious and responsible students.

This study focuses on how the school ecosystem is interconnected in optimizing the role of the hidden IRE curriculum and its implementation to shape religious and responsible students, as well as how an interconnective school ecosystem-based hidden IRE curriculum model can be formulated to support the continuous character building of students, and aims to analyze the interrelationships of the school ecosystem in optimizing This study examines the role of the hidden IRE curriculum in shaping religious and responsible students. The objective is to formulate a conceptual model of the hidden curriculum of Islamic Education based on an interconnected school ecosystem to support sustainable character building. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of Islamic Education and character education, providing practical contributions as a conceptual reference for schools and educators in optimizing the role of the hidden curriculum in a systematic and sustainable manner.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the hidden curriculum practices of Islamic Education in shaping the religious character and responsibility of students at SDIT Salman Al Farisi 2 (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The case study approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore phenomena contextually and holistically, particularly in examining the relationship between elements of the school ecosystem such as school culture, educator role models, institutional policies, and social interaction patterns that play a role in optimizing the hidden curriculum of IRE. This research is not oriented towards testing the effectiveness or development of learning products, but rather towards analyzing the meaning, patterns, and relationships of value education practices that occur implicitly in the natural context of schools.

Data collection methods included observation, interviews, and comprehensive document studies related to the implementation of the hidden IRE curriculum and its contribution to the formation of religious character and responsibility among students. Observation was carried out to identify actual practices, habitual activities, school culture, and daily interactions that reflect the operation of the hidden curriculum in the school environment. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to obtain in-depth information regarding participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of how Islamic values were internalized through both formal and informal educational processes. In addition, document analysis was used to examine school policies, lesson plans, student activity records, school regulations, and other relevant administrative documents that could provide supporting evidence for the implementation of the hidden curriculum. Research informants were determined purposively, including school principals, IRE teachers, classroom teachers, and other parties involved in character education at school.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, including data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. To ensure data validity, source triangulation and technique triangulation were used. This was done by comparing the results obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation studies to ensure the consistency and credibility of the research findings. The results of the analysis are then used as a basis for formulating a

conceptual model of the hidden IRE curriculum based on an interconnective school ecosystem, which describes the pattern of relationships between components of values education in a systematic and sustainable manner.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Practice of the Hidden Curriculum of Islamic Religious Education in the School Ecosystem

The practice of the hidden curriculum of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at SDIT Salman Al-Farisi 2 is not formally documented in written curriculum guidelines, but is embedded and internalized through daily practices within the school ecosystem. This hidden curriculum operates implicitly through school culture, teacher exemplarity, and routine activities that consistently reflect Islamic values in students' everyday experiences. Based on field observations conducted by the researcher, before formal learning activities begin, students are habituated to performing salat dhuha in congregation. This activity takes place in the morning and is guided by classroom teachers and IRE teachers who arrive earlier and demonstrate discipline and devotion in worship. During the activity, teachers do not provide coercive verbal instructions; instead, students participate with personal awareness and voluntary engagement. This situation indicates that the internalization of religious values occurs naturally through repeated experiences and social interaction within the school environment, rather than through formal directives alone (Observation Data, Figure 1, SDIT Salman Al Farisi 2).



Figure 1. Congregational Dhuha prayer



Figure 2. Sedekah Jumat Activity as a form of Social Care Value Internalization Through the Hidden Curriculum of Islamic Religious Education

Figure 2 shows the Friday Almsgiving practice carried out as part of the values-based education program within the SDIT Salman Al-Farisi 2 school ecosystem. In this activity, the school community is directly involved in sharing alms with the surrounding community. This

activity is conducted routinely every Friday and involves students in the process of giving alms directly, so that the values of social care, empathy, and sincerity are not only conceptually understood but also experienced through concrete actions. This Friday Almsgiving practice reflects the implementation of the hidden curriculum of Islamic Religious Education, which works through habituation and direct experience. Through simple yet meaningful social interactions, students learn to internalize religious values and social responsibility as part of their daily lives. Thus, this activity serves as a concrete example of how Islamic values are brought to life in daily practice within an integrated school ecosystem.



Figure 3. Shake Hands Every Time the Teacher Arrives and Before Entering Class

Figure 3 illustrates the habitual practice of students shaking hands with the teacher every time the teacher arrives and before entering the classroom. This activity reflects the implementation of the hidden curriculum through daily routines that implicitly instill Islamic values, respect, and discipline among students. The practice of greeting and shaking hands with the teacher not only symbolizes politeness and courtesy, but also serves as a form of moral education that strengthens students' religious character, obedience, and sense of responsibility. Through this repeated interaction, students are accustomed to showing respect to authority figures, maintaining proper social manners, and internalizing values of humility and brotherhood in the school environment. In the context of Islamic Religious Education, this routine becomes an important medium for value transmission because it connects religious teachings with concrete behavior in everyday school life.

The Role of the Hidden Curriculum of Islamic Education in Shaping Students' Religious Character and Responsibility

The role of the hidden curriculum of Islamic Religious Education (Pendidikan Agama Islam/IRE) in shaping students' religious character and sense of responsibility at SDIT Salman Al-Farisi 2 is reflected in observable changes in students' behavior during daily school activities. Based on interviews with IRE teachers (FA), the internalization of religious values is not conveyed merely through verbal instruction or lecturing, but through reflective reinforcement embedded in students' everyday experiences. When students make mistakes, teachers apply value-based reminders and dialogical approaches rather than punitive measures. This strategy encourages students to understand responsibility internally, not simply to comply out of fear of sanctions. Such an approach indicates that character formation is directed toward developing intrinsic moral awareness rather than external obedience.

Observational findings further reveal that students demonstrate a high level of independence and responsibility in experiential-based activities such as Market Day and the

Pancasila Student Profile (P5) strengthening projects. In these activities, students are entrusted with task distribution, time management, cooperation, and honesty in simple transactions. These behaviors indicate that responsibility is not merely understood conceptually but has been internalized through repeated and meaningful experiences. Thus, the hidden curriculum of IRE functions as a mechanism that bridges normative Islamic values with students' lived practices within the school environment.

Research findings also show that the implementation of the hidden curriculum of Islamic Religious Education at SDIT Salman Al-Farisi 2 operates in an integrative manner within the school ecosystem. This integrative approach was clearly articulated by the school principal (Bu DS), who stated: "The formation of religious character and responsibility cannot be placed solely on IRE teachers (Bu FS). All elements of the school must move together, from policies and habituation programs to exemplary behavior in daily activities." Similarly, a IRE teacher emphasized: "In Islamic education learning, we do not only focus on delivering material, but also on building students' awareness through exemplarity and reflection. The value of responsibility is instilled through habits and experiences, not merely through rules." Classroom teachers (Bu WW) further explained that daily value habituation in the classroom such as discipline, responsibility for tasks, and mutual respect has enabled students to practice these values without continuous direction. These statements confirm that character formation is the result of collective and interconnected efforts among school stakeholders, reflecting the integrative nature of the school ecosystem. The hidden curriculum of IRE plays a significant role in shaping students' religious character through direct experiences gained in various school activities.

Observational results indicate that religious values are not only understood as compliance with worship rituals but are also manifested in everyday attitudes such as politeness in social interactions, honesty, discipline, and moral responsibility. Students demonstrate positive responses to the school's religious atmosphere, as reflected in their active participation in religious activities, adherence to school norms, and ability to translate religious values into concrete actions. This suggests that the internalization of religious values through the hidden curriculum occurs gradually, contextually, and sustainably. Character formation involves the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action through consistent educational experiences.

Conceptual Model of Hidden Curriculum for Islamic Education Based on Interconnected School Ecosystem

Based on research findings, the formation of religious character and responsibility in students at SDIT Salman Al-Farisi 2 does not occur in isolation or in isolation, but rather through strong interconnections between elements within the school ecosystem. Therefore, this study formulates a conceptual model of the hidden curriculum for Islamic Religious Education based on an interconnected school ecosystem as an integrative framework for student character formation. In this study, an interconnected school ecosystem is defined as an integrative educational system in which all elements of the school, including the principal, Islamic Religious Education teachers, classroom teachers, students, institutional policies, school culture, and the social and physical environment, are interconnected, influence each other, and work consistently in the process of values education. Integration in this context does not simply indicate the involvement of many parties but emphasizes the integration of roles, alignment of values, and the continuity of character-building practices across all school activities, both formal and informal.

Beyond religious rituals, the value of responsibility is also internalized through daily habituation practices. Observations reveal that students independently maintain classroom cleanliness, organize learning materials, and return borrowed items without strict supervision

from teachers. These routines suggest that school rules are not merely perceived as formal obligations, but have developed into students' moral awareness. Such practices demonstrate that the hidden curriculum of IRE functions through consistent habituation and exemplarity embedded in non-formal school activities. These findings are further supported by in-depth interviews with the school principal (Bu DP), who emphasized that character education is conceptualized by the school community as a continuous process of habituation and exemplary behavior, rather than as a mere transfer of normative knowledge within formal learning settings. According to the principal, religious values and responsibility must not only be taught cognitively but must be lived and experienced through concrete practices within the school environment. This perspective reflects a shared understanding among school stakeholders that character formation is a collective responsibility within an interconnected school ecosystem. Thus, the hidden curriculum functions as an implicit medium through which students acquire values via direct experiences in their daily social interactions at school. The hidden curriculum, namely the values, norms, and attitudes acquired by students through social interaction in the school environment, outside of the formal written curriculum.

Implicit forms of Islamic education practices are evident in various routine activities that are not explicitly labeled as IRE learning, yet are rich in Islamic values. Teachers consistently encourage the use of polite language, greetings (salam), and prayers before and after learning activities, including outside IRE class hours. When reminding students, teachers employ persuasive and religiously nuanced language rather than repressive punishment. These dialogical and contextual interactions allow students to reflect on moral values within real-life situations, thereby strengthening internal moral awareness. Value internalization occurs through observation, imitation, and social reinforcement within a learning environment.

Religious school culture is the main foundation that strengthens the functioning of the hidden IRE curriculum. The school environment is intentionally designed to cultivate a consistent religious atmosphere, including the facilitation of congregational prayers, regular religious activities, and the maintenance of a clean and orderly physical environment as an expression of Islamic values. This environment does not merely symbolize religiosity but actively shapes students' collective consciousness regarding discipline, responsibility, and social awareness. These values are gradually internalized through repeated daily interactions, forming relatively stable and enduring character traits. Positions schools as microsystems that play a crucial role in character formation through meaningful interactions between individuals and their environment.

Discussion

Teachers' exemplary behavior plays a central role in the internalization of values through the hidden curriculum of Islamic education (Islamia et al., 2024; Samsir, 2022). The role of teachers is not limited to teaching, but also as role models who represent positive values for students (Nadziroh, 2025). A disciplined attitude, responsibility towards tasks, involvement in religious activities, and the willingness of teachers to be reflective and humble, including admitting mistakes, serve as concrete examples that are observed and imitated by students (Kurnia & Hadi, 2025). This exemplarity enhances the effectiveness of the hidden curriculum, as Islamic values are not merely verbalized but manifested consistently through real behavior.

In addition, unwritten rules and daily habits contribute significantly to shaping the value framework within the school ecosystem (Amu et al., 2025). Students gradually develop awareness of the importance of discipline, honesty, and responsibility without relying on strict supervision or formal sanctions. Habits such as queuing, maintaining cleanliness, and

returning items that do not belong to them reflect the implicit internalization of responsibility. This condition demonstrates that the hidden curriculum of IRE operates effectively through sustained habituation and value internalization, ultimately shaping students' religious character and sense of responsibility as integral aspects of their personality. These findings align with the concept of value habituation in character education, which emphasizes the repetition of meaningful experiences as the foundation of sustainable character development.

The value of responsibility is further strengthened through school activities designed as meaningful learning experiences, particularly project-based and entrepreneurial activities such as Market Day and the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) strengthening projects. In these activities, students are not only trained to complete tasks but are also required to take responsibility for the roles they assume, both individually and collectively. This responsibility includes time management, decision-making, cooperation, and honesty throughout the process. Through such experiences, responsibility is not taught normatively but is experienced as a direct consequence of students' actions. This condition aligns with the principles of experiential learning, which emphasize that values and attitudes are more deeply internalized when learners are actively involved in real and reflective experiences (Thi, 2025). Students' responses to the hidden curriculum of Islamic Education are evident in behavioral changes that are increasingly reflective and independent. Students demonstrate discipline without strict supervision, complete tasks with personal awareness, and show concern for the social environment of the school. Such behavior reflects the formation of value awareness, enabling students not only to memorize moral values but also to understand their deeper meaning and practical implications in everyday life (Rahmadani et al., 2025).

These values become living values embodied in students' daily practices rather than abstract concepts confined to formal instruction (Husaini, 2024). This finding reinforces the theory of value internalization, which asserts that the success of character education is marked by the emergence of intrinsic moral awareness rather than external compliance. Thus, the hidden curriculum of IRE functions as a strategic mechanism for integrating religious values and responsibility into students' learning experiences. Through collaborative, contextual, and sustainable school activities, Islamic values are internalized more deeply and shape students' character holistically. These findings affirm that the formation of religious character and responsibility is most effective when values are lived through real experiences within an interconnected school ecosystem, rather than conveyed solely through normative classroom instruction. In this sense, the hidden curriculum of IRE serves as a vital bridge between the normative teachings of Islamic education and students' real-life practices within the school environment.

The formation of religious character and responsibility does not depend solely on Islamic Religious Education (IRE) instruction in the classroom, but rather results from the ongoing interaction between school policies, educators' role models, daily habits, and the contextual learning experiences of students. Thus, students' character is formed through the collective work of a mutually reinforcing school ecosystem, not through sporadic or fragmented educational interventions. Based on the synthesis of research findings, a conceptual model of the hidden curriculum of Islamic Religious Education based on an interconnective school ecosystem can be formulated as an integrative framework for shaping religious and responsible character in students. This model is built from the interrelationship between various elements of the school ecosystem that interact dynamically and sustainably in internalizing Islamic values. The findings show that the effectiveness of the hidden curriculum of Islamic Education does not stand alone but is largely determined by the quality of the relationships between the educational elements that shape the overall school climate. The development of an individual's character is influenced by systemic interactions between

interconnected environments. The school ecosystem in this model includes the roles of the principal, teachers, students, institutional policies, school culture, and the social and physical environment of the school. All of these elements function as agents of values education that work in an interconnected manner. Teacher role modeling, daily permissions, and religious culture are not conveyed through instruction, but are transmitted through the learning experiences of students in various formal and informal activities in the school environment.

The hidden IRE curriculum in this model works through a mechanism of implicit contextual and repetitive value internalization. The internalization process takes place when students interact with a school environment that consistently displays religious values and responsibility in practice. Activities such as worship habits, exemplary teacher attitudes, ethical social interactions, and experience-based activities such as market day and P5 become spaces for the actualization of values that strengthen students' moral awareness. Thus, religious values and responsibility are not only understood but also internalized and practiced in everyday life. This mechanism is in line with Dewey's experiential learning theory, which emphasizes that values and character are formed through reflective experiences in the context of real life.

This conceptual model emphasizes that shaping religious and responsible character in students is the result of an integrative process between the hidden curriculum of Islamic Education and the interconnected school ecosystem. Character formation is not instantaneous, but develops gradually through continuous and valuable learning experiences. Thus, this model shows that optimizing the hidden curriculum of IRE will be more effective if it is supported by an interconnected school ecosystem that collectively brings Islamic values to life in all aspects of school life. The novelty of this model lies in the systematic integration between the concept of the hidden curriculum of IRE and the interconnected school ecosystem approach, which has not been comprehensively studied in previous research. This conceptual model can be used as a reference in developing character education practices based on the values of Islamic Religious Education that are sustainable and contextual.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the hidden curriculum of Islamic Education is important in shaping the religious and responsible character of students when integrated into an interconnected school ecosystem. Islamic values are implicitly internalized through religious school culture, teacher role models, daily habits, and consistent social interactions, so that students not only know about religion, but also practice it in their lives. The findings of the study confirm that character building is the result of synergy between elements of the school ecosystem, including leadership, educators, institutional policies, and the social and physical environment of the school. Experience-based activities, such as worship habits, entrepreneurship, and character-building programs, are effective means of instilling religious values and responsibility. Based on these findings, this study formulates a conceptual model of the hidden curriculum of Islamic Education based on an interconnected school ecosystem that places student learning experiences at the center of character building. This model emphasizes that strengthening the hidden curriculum of Islamic Education is important for continuously shaping students' religious character and responsibility.

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