



Teachers' Strategies for Developing Students' Religious Character through Aswaja Activities

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to explore teachers' strategies for strengthening students' religious character through Aswaja activities and to examine the supporting and inhibiting factors as well as the impacts of these activities on students' character development. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation involving school leaders, teachers, and students selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion verification. The findings revealed that teachers strengthened students' religious character through integrated strategies involving systematic planning, religious habituation, teacher modelling, and leadership-oriented learning. The implementation of Aswaja activities was supported by institutional commitment, teacher collaboration, and a strong religious school culture, although several challenges emerged related to students' motivation, preparedness, and technical limitations. Furthermore, Aswaja activities contributed to improving students' religious discipline, responsibility, leadership, self-confidence, communication skills, and social awareness. This study implies that Aswaja-based character education can serve as an effective approach for integrating religious values with students' personal and social competency development in vocational education contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a critical concern in contemporary education because schools are increasingly challenged to prepare students not only with academic competence but also with strong moral and religious foundations. The rapid development of technology, globalization, and social transformation has influenced young people's attitudes, behaviours, and value

systems, creating challenges related to discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and ethical awareness. Religious character education is therefore essential because it provides students with moral guidance and spiritual foundations that shape responsible individuals within society. Previous studies emphasize that Islamic Religious Education (PAI) contributes significantly to character formation through value internalization, religious habituation, and teacher guidance within educational environments (Nasrullah et al., 2023; Haerudin, 2025; Alawiyah et al., 2025). Therefore, strengthening students' religious character is not only an educational responsibility but also a social necessity to develop future generations with integrity and positive social awareness.

The importance of religious character education is further strengthened by the increasing need for educational institutions to balance intellectual development with moral responsibility. Students who possess professional competence without ethical awareness may face difficulties in making responsible decisions in social and professional environments. This condition is particularly relevant in vocational education, where students are prepared to enter the workforce and interact directly with broader society. Research indicates that character education integrated into Islamic educational practices can strengthen students' discipline, responsibility, moderation, and social behaviour (Umar et al., 2024; Zainudin et al., 2025; Fatah et al., 2025). Consequently, schools need strategic approaches that combine academic and vocational preparation with religious values. Islamic educational institutions, particularly those affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), have responded to this challenge by implementing Aswaja-based character education as an approach to cultivate students' religious identity and social responsibility.

Despite the importance of religious character education, its implementation continues to face various challenges in educational institutions, particularly vocational high schools. The strong emphasis on technical skills, competency standards, and industry preparation often causes character education to receive less attention compared with vocational achievement. As a result, some students may demonstrate adequate professional skills but still require stronger development in discipline, responsibility, religious awareness, and ethical behaviour. Previous research highlights that character education requires systematic planning, continuous implementation, teacher involvement, and supportive school culture to become effective (Faujiah et al., 2023; Haluti et al., 2024; Jakandar et al., 2025). Therefore, vocational schools require contextual strategies that enable religious values to be integrated with students' learning experiences and future professional demands.

At SMK NU 1 Bustanul Ulum, Aswaja activities represent an institutional effort to strengthen students' religious character through structured religious practices. The school implements various activities, including tawassul, istighasah, tahlil, Maulid Diba', and collective prayers, as part of students' daily religious experiences. These activities are not merely religious routines but educational processes designed to internalize Aswaja values such as tawassuth (moderation), tasamuh (tolerance), tawazun (balance), and i'tidal (justice). Through continuous participation, students are expected to develop discipline, responsibility, respect, and social awareness. Previous studies demonstrate that Aswaja-based activities can strengthen students' religious identity and moderate character through school culture and value habituation (Latif et al., 2023; Fahrurrozi et al., 2025; Sari et al., 2024). However, the specific strategies employed by teachers in managing these activities within vocational education remain insufficiently explored.

Previous studies have provided valuable insights into the relationship between Aswaja values, teacher roles, and students' character development. Research has shown that the internalization of Aswaja values through school environment design, religious culture, and collaborative strategies contributes to strengthening students' religious character (Widiyono, 2022; Yusuf et al., 2024; Supriyandi et al., 2025). Other studies reveal that Islamic Religious Education teachers play important roles as moral agents through exemplary behaviour, religious guidance, and character-oriented learning strategies (Judrah et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2025). Furthermore, research on Aswaja-based character models highlights the importance of integrating local Islamic traditions with educational practices to develop students' moral values and social responsibility (Zainudin et al., 2025; Umar et al., 2024; Nisa' et al., 2023). These studies confirm the significance of Aswaja education but provide limited explanation regarding the strategic processes implemented by teachers.

Although previous research has contributed significantly to understanding Aswaja-based character education, several limitations remain. Most studies have focused on the existence of Aswaja values, religious habituation, or general outcomes of character education in madrasah and Islamic schools. Limited attention has been given to how teachers strategically plan, organize, supervise, and evaluate Aswaja activities, especially within vocational high schools that have unique educational characteristics. In addition, previous studies have rarely examined how Aswaja activities contribute beyond religious character formation, such as developing leadership, communication skills, self-confidence, and social competence among students. Therefore, this research addresses an important gap by examining teachers' strategies and the broader educational impacts of Aswaja activities in a vocational school context.

This study presents a novel perspective by positioning Aswaja activities as a multidimensional educational strategy that integrates religious character formation with personal and social competency development. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine Aswaja values as religious identity reinforcement, this study explores how teachers transform Aswaja activities into meaningful educational experiences through planning, implementation, supervision, and student involvement. The novelty of this research lies in revealing the strategic role of teachers in connecting religious habituation with leadership development, responsibility building, and student empowerment within vocational education. This perspective is important because vocational schools require graduates who are not only technically competent but also possess ethical awareness, strong character, and social responsibility.

Based on these considerations, this study argues that effective Aswaja-based character education depends on teachers' strategic capacity to manage religious activities systematically and contextually. The central research problem addressed in this study concerns how teachers strengthen students' religious character through Aswaja activities, what factors influence the implementation process, and how these activities contribute to students' character development. This study contributes by providing an empirical understanding of teacher strategies in implementing Aswaja-based character education within vocational education. The findings are expected to enrich discussions on Islamic character education and provide practical insights for teachers, school leaders, and educational institutions in developing sustainable religious character programs.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore teachers' strategies for strengthening students' religious character through Aswaja activities at SMK NU 1 Bustanul Ulum. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences, practices, and perspectives regarding the implementation of religious character education within its natural educational context. This design was appropriate for examining how Aswaja values were planned, implemented, and internalized through school activities rather than measuring causal relationships or statistical effects. Previous studies on Islamic character education have demonstrated that qualitative approaches are effective for exploring teachers' roles, value internalization processes, and the development of religious culture within educational institutions (Nasrullah et al., 2023; Judrah et al., 2024). Therefore, this approach enabled the researcher to comprehensively interpret teachers' strategies, supporting and inhibiting factors, and the impacts of Aswaja activities on students' religious character.

The research was conducted at SMK NU 1 Bustanul Ulum, a vocational Islamic school that actively implements Aswaja-based religious activities as part of its character education program. This location was selected because the school integrates Aswaja values into students' daily educational experiences through structured activities such as tawassul, istighasah, tahlil, Maulid Diba', and collective prayers. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in planning, implementing, supervising, and participating in Aswaja activities. The participants included school leaders, teachers responsible for Aswaja programs, and students who actively participated in religious activities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews explored teachers' strategies, program implementation, challenges, and perceived impacts, while observations and documentation were used to examine activity implementation and verify the consistency of the findings. This approach is consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of multiple data sources in understanding Islamic character education practices (Fahrurrozi et al., 2025; Umar et al., 2024).

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents was selected, coded, categorized, and organized based on emerging themes related to teachers' strategies, implementation factors, and the impacts of Aswaja activities. The condensed data were then displayed in narrative and thematic forms to identify patterns and relationships among findings. The final stage involved verifying conclusions through continuous interpretation and comparison of data from different sources. Source and technique triangulation were applied by comparing information from teachers, school leaders, students, observations, and documents to ensure the credibility and consistency of the findings. This analytical process supports previous studies highlighting that systematic analysis and triangulation are essential for producing credible findings in qualitative research on Islamic education and character development (Widiyono, 2022; Zainudin et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study identified three major themes regarding the implementation of Aswaja activities at SMK NU 1 Bustanul Ulum: teachers' strategies in strengthening students' religious character, supporting and inhibiting factors influencing implementation, and the impacts of Aswaja activities on students'

religious character. The findings demonstrate that Aswaja activities were not implemented as isolated religious programs but as an integrated educational process involving teachers, students, and school management. The implementation emphasized value internalization through habituation, exemplary behaviour, and student involvement in religious practices. A summary of the main findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the Main Findings

Research Focus	Main Findings
Teachers' Strategies	Teachers strengthened students' religious character through the integration of Aswaja values into classroom instruction and routine religious activities. The strategies emphasized systematic planning, religious habituation, teacher modelling, and leadership development.
Supporting Factors	The implementation was supported by school commitment, collaboration among teachers, a strong religious school culture, and structured Aswaja programs.
Inhibiting Factors	The main challenges included students' varying motivation, limited preparedness, and technical constraints during religious activities.
Impacts	Aswaja activities contributed to the development of students' religious discipline, responsibility, leadership, self-confidence, and respectful behaviour toward others.

Teachers' Strategies in Integrating Aswaja Values into Religious Character Education

The findings revealed that teachers at SMK NU 1 Bustanul Ulum implemented an integrated strategy to strengthen students' religious character by incorporating Aswaja values into both classroom instruction and routine religious activities. Religious character education was developed not only through theoretical understanding but also through continuous practices embedded in students' daily school experiences. Teachers collaboratively prepared activity schedules, distributed responsibilities, and integrated Aswaja values into curricular and extracurricular programs. Religious activities, including tawassul, istighasah, tahlil, Maulid Diba' recitation, and collective prayers, were regularly conducted every Wednesday after the congregational Dhuhr prayer. This approach enabled students to understand religious values while directly experiencing their application in authentic educational contexts.

The findings also indicated that religious habituation and teacher modelling were central strategies in developing students' religious character. Teachers actively supervised students during religious activities, corrected errors in recitation, encouraged participation, and provided continuous motivation throughout the process. Instead of depending only on classroom-based religious

instruction, teachers emphasized repeated practice as a mechanism for developing discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and commitment to Aswaja values. Through consistent involvement in religious activities, students gradually internalized these values, which were reflected in their daily attitudes and behaviours within the school environment.

Another important finding was the integration of leadership development within Aswaja activities. Students were given opportunities to take rotational roles in leading tawassul, istighasah, tahlil, and collective prayers under teachers' supervision. This strategy provided students with direct experiences in practicing religious leadership while strengthening their communication skills, responsibility, and self-confidence. Through these authentic leadership opportunities, students became more independent and were encouraged to develop the capacity to contribute positively to their communities after graduation.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Implementing Aswaja Activities

The findings showed that the implementation of Aswaja activities at SMK NU 1 Bustanul Ulum was supported by several internal and external factors. A major supporting factor was the strong institutional commitment to integrating Aswaja values into the school's educational programs. This commitment was demonstrated through the involvement of school leaders and teachers in planning, organizing, implementing, and supervising religious activities. Furthermore, the existence of a religious school culture encouraged students to participate actively in Aswaja programs. Structured activity schedules, available facilities, and continuous teacher guidance also contributed to maintaining the consistency of program implementation.

Teacher collaboration was another significant factor supporting the success of Aswaja activities. Cooperation among teachers enabled the program to be implemented systematically and ensured that students received consistent guidance throughout the activities. The integration of Aswaja values into school routines created an environment where religious practices became part of students' daily experiences rather than occasional activities. This condition strengthened the sustainability of the program and supported the development of students' religious character through collective commitment among school members.

Despite these supporting conditions, the study identified several challenges affecting the implementation of Aswaja activities. Differences in students' motivation and participation occasionally influenced the effectiveness of religious programs. Some students were not fully prepared for activities, such as forgetting to bring required religious books or lacking confidence when

assigned to lead religious practices. In addition, technical constraints, including sound system problems and limited time due to the vocational curriculum, became obstacles during implementation. To overcome these challenges, teachers applied continuous guidance, persuasive disciplinary approaches, and motivational strategies to encourage students' active involvement.

The Impacts of Aswaja Activities on Students' Religious Character

The findings revealed that Aswaja activities positively influenced students' religious character at SMK NU 1 Bustanul Ulum. Continuous participation in religious programs encouraged students to develop stronger discipline in performing daily worship, greater responsibility in completing assigned duties, and more respectful attitudes toward teachers and peers. Through regular involvement in tawassul, istighasah, tahlil, and other religious practices, students gradually internalized Aswaja values, which were reflected in their behaviours and interactions both inside and outside the classroom.

The study further found that Aswaja activities contributed to the development of students' leadership abilities and self-confidence. Students who received opportunities to lead religious activities demonstrated improved confidence in speaking before others and greater responsibility in carrying out their assigned roles. These experiences provided students with practical opportunities to develop communication skills and leadership attitudes within a religious context. Therefore, Aswaja activities functioned not only as religious practices but also as platforms for developing students' personal competencies.

Beyond religious discipline and leadership development, Aswaja activities also strengthened students' social awareness and cooperation. Participation in collective religious activities encouraged students to respect others, work together, and develop positive relationships within the school community. The combination of religious habituation, teacher guidance, and student involvement enabled Aswaja activities to become an effective medium for shaping students' holistic character. These findings indicate that Aswaja-based activities have broader educational value in preparing students to participate constructively in society after graduation.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that teachers' strategies in integrating Aswaja values into classroom instruction and religious activities represent an effective approach to strengthening students' religious character. The results indicate that character formation does not occur through religious knowledge alone but through continuous processes involving understanding, habituation, and direct practice. This finding supports previous research showing that Islamic Religious

Education teachers play an important role as moral agents who strengthen students' character through guidance, modelling, and value-based learning processes (Judrah et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2025). Furthermore, the integration of Islamic values into school programs and learning environments has been shown to strengthen students' moral awareness and religious identity (Firdaus & Makhful, 2023; Haerudin, 2025). Therefore, this study confirms that Aswaja activities become meaningful character education instruments when teachers transform religious values into consistent educational experiences.

The findings also reveal that religious habituation and teacher modelling are central mechanisms in the internalization of Aswaja values. Regular implementation of tawassul, istighasah, tahlil, Maulid Diba', and collective prayers enabled students to experience religious values directly and gradually develop discipline, responsibility, and respectful behaviour. This finding strengthens previous studies emphasizing that religious character education requires continuous habituation supported by teachers' exemplary attitudes and institutional consistency (Fahyuni et al., 2023; Haluti et al., 2024). Similarly, research on Aswaja-based education highlights that values such as tawassuth, tawazun, tasamuh, and i'tidal can strengthen students' moderate religious character when implemented through structured school practices (Latif et al., 2023; Syahroni & Rofiq, 2025). Thus, the present study confirms that Aswaja values become more effective when practiced as part of students' daily school culture.

A significant contribution of this study is the identification of leadership development as an extended outcome of Aswaja activities. Previous studies have mainly focused on Aswaja implementation as a means of strengthening religious identity and moral values; however, this study demonstrates that Aswaja activities can simultaneously develop students' leadership, communication skills, and self-confidence. Assigning students to lead religious practices provided authentic experiences that connected spiritual development with personal competence. This finding is consistent with research highlighting that Islamic educational strategies should encourage active student participation and responsibility development (Sufiani et al., 2022; Zainudin et al., 2025). Therefore, this study expands the understanding of Aswaja-based character education by showing that religious activities can function as a platform for developing both spiritual values and leadership capacities, particularly within vocational education contexts.

The findings further indicate that successful implementation of Aswaja activities depends on institutional commitment, teacher collaboration, and a supportive religious school culture. The involvement of school leaders and teachers in planning, organizing, and supervising activities created consistency

in the implementation process. This finding supports previous studies indicating that character education requires strategic management, stakeholder collaboration, and a supportive educational environment to achieve sustainable outcomes (Faujiah et al., 2023; Widiyono, 2022). Unlike approaches that position character education as an individual teacher responsibility, this study highlights that strengthening religious character is a collective institutional process. The contribution of this finding lies in demonstrating that Aswaja-based character education requires alignment between school policies, teacher practices, and students' daily experiences to ensure effective value internalization.

Although Aswaja activities received strong institutional support, the findings also show that implementation challenges remain, particularly related to students' motivation, preparedness, and technical limitations. However, teachers responded to these challenges through persuasive guidance, continuous motivation, and adaptive supervision rather than relying only on disciplinary approaches. This finding indicates that teacher flexibility is an essential element in maintaining the effectiveness of religious character programs. Previous studies similarly emphasize that PAI teachers need adaptive strategies, continuous mentoring, and contextual approaches to overcome challenges in developing students' character (Karwadi et al., 2023; Solehah et al., 2025). Therefore, this study contributes practical insights by showing that successful Aswaja implementation depends not only on program availability but also on teachers' ability to manage diverse student conditions.

The findings confirm that Aswaja activities contribute significantly to students' religious character development by transforming religious values into observable behaviours. Improvements in religious discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and respect indicate that students were able to internalize Aswaja values through continuous participation. This finding aligns with previous research demonstrating that Aswaja-based education strengthens religious moderation, moral awareness, and students' social responsibility through systematic value integration (Masturin, 2023; Umar et al., 2024). Moreover, studies on Aswaja implementation in Islamic educational institutions show that structured religious activities can support the development of moderate and responsible Muslim generations (Abida, 2025; Khofifah et al., 2025). Thus, the present study reinforces the argument that Aswaja activities serve not merely as religious rituals but as comprehensive character education strategies.

Overall, this study provides a novel contribution by positioning Aswaja activities as a multidimensional educational strategy that integrates religious character formation, leadership development, and social competence within a vocational school setting. While previous studies have examined Aswaja values mainly in madrasah and higher education contexts, this research highlights how

vocational schools can utilize Aswaja activities to prepare students with both professional abilities and strong moral foundations. The study suggests that effective religious character education requires a combination of teacher strategies, institutional support, and meaningful student engagement. These findings contribute to Islamic education research by offering an empirical model of how Aswaja values can be transformed into practical educational experiences that respond to contemporary challenges in character formation.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights that the integration of Aswaja values through systematic planning, religious habituation, teacher modelling, and student involvement in leadership-oriented activities provides valuable lessons on how religious character education can be effectively implemented in vocational education. The findings demonstrate that Aswaja activities not only strengthen students' religious discipline, responsibility, and respectful behaviour but also contribute to the development of leadership, communication skills, self-confidence, and social awareness. The main contribution of this study lies in expanding the understanding of Aswaja-based character education by demonstrating that religious activities can function as multidimensional educational practices that integrate spiritual development with personal and social competencies. However, this study is limited to a single vocational high school context, which may restrict the transferability of the findings. Future research is recommended to explore Aswaja-based character education in various educational settings with broader participants and socio-cultural backgrounds, as well as to examine its long-term effectiveness in shaping students' religious character development.

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