



EXPLORING INNOVATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION TO STRENGTHEN RELIGIOUS VALUES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education plays a crucial role in fostering children's holistic development, including the formation of moral, spiritual, and religious values. However, learning practices in many early childhood settings remain teacher-centered and primarily emphasize cognitive achievement, limiting meaningful experiences that support religious value development. This study explores innovative educational practices and their contribution to strengthening children's religious values. A qualitative multiple case study design was employed, with data collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and school principals, and document analysis. Data were analyzed thematically using an interactive analysis model. The findings indicate that innovative practices, including play-based learning, storytelling, movement and songs, Qur'anic learning, religious habituation, collaborative learning, and family involvement, foster meaningful learning experiences that facilitate the internalization of religious values. Children's active participation, positive social interactions, and contextual learning emerged as key factors supporting religious development. However, implementation remains constrained by limited teacher competence, insufficient learning resources, and the lack of comprehensive pedagogical guidelines. The study concludes that child-centered, innovative learning supported by collaboration among schools, teachers, and families is essential for strengthening religious values and promoting holistic child development.

Keywords: *early childhood education, innovative practices, religious values, qualitative study, child-centered learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) serves as the fundamental foundation for developing high-quality human resources, as early childhood represents the *golden age* of development, during which children experience rapid growth across cognitive, language, socio-emotional, physical, motor, and spiritual domains. Numerous studies have demonstrated that learning experiences acquired during this critical period become the basis for the formation of children's character, attitudes, habits, and personality throughout their lives. Therefore, early childhood education should not merely emphasize academic achievement but must also foster children's character, moral values, and

religious values as essential provisions for their future lives (Anwar, 2026; Samsuriadi, 2025).

Religious values constitute one of the developmental domains that receive particular emphasis within Indonesia's Early Childhood Education Curriculum. The development of religious and moral values aims to enable children to recognize God, practice religious teachings according to their developmental stage, and develop honesty, discipline, responsibility, empathy, and respect for others. Religious education in early childhood should therefore be understood not simply as the transmission of religious knowledge, but as a continuous process of internalizing values through meaningful learning experiences, role modeling, habituation, social interaction, and supportive learning environments. This perspective indicates that the purpose of religious education extends beyond fostering religious understanding to nurturing beliefs, attitudes, and practices that are reflected in children's everyday lives (Masdul et al., 2024).

Previous studies have consistently shown that introducing religious values during early childhood makes a significant contribution to children's character development. Children who receive consistent religious stimulation tend to demonstrate greater self-regulation, prosocial behavior, empathy, respect for others, and stronger moral reasoning. Conversely, when children's early developmental experiences lack positive moral and religious values, their moral development may not be optimally nurtured, potentially influencing their behavior during subsequent stages of development (Izzatunnisa & Mutiawati, 2024).

A growing body of research has also identified various strategies for fostering religious values among young children. These strategies include habituation of daily worship practices, teacher role modeling, storytelling, role-playing, singing, the use of Islamic learning media, experiential learning, and the integration of religious values into all learning activities. Collectively, these approaches suggest that the development of religious values is more effective when implemented contextually, through enjoyable learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate and supported by the entire learning environment (Hasan et al., 2026; Samsuriadi, 2025; Saputri et al., 2026).

Despite these efforts, the implementation of religious education in early childhood settings continues to face several challenges. Evaluations of religious and moral education indicate that instructional practices in many institutions remain largely dominated by routine activities such as daily prayers, Qur'anic memorization, recognition of religious symbols, and procedural worship practices. Such routine-oriented approaches often fail to facilitate children's deep understanding of religious values, resulting in children memorizing religious content without fully internalizing its meaning in their daily lives. Furthermore, instructional methods that are not aligned with children's developmental characteristics may reduce learning engagement and limit the meaningfulness of religious education (Istiyani et al., 2024).

At the same time, rapid social changes driven by digital technology, social media, and evolving family interaction patterns present new challenges for early childhood education. Young children are increasingly exposed to digital environments that do not always promote positive moral and religious values. These conditions require early childhood institutions not only to maintain conventional approaches to religious education but also to develop innovative learning practices that address the needs of children growing up in the twenty-first century. Such innovations may include play-based learning models, the use of educational digital media, the integration of local cultural values with Islamic teachings, project-based learning, and strengthened collaboration



among schools, families, and communities to establish consistent religious learning environments (Mutia & Bantali, 2026; Sholeh et al., 2025).

Although previous studies have examined the effectiveness of specific instructional strategies—including habituation, teacher role modeling, role-playing methods, and Islamic values-based curriculum development—and have discussed the roles of parents, school culture, and curriculum integration, relatively few studies have comprehensively explored how educational innovations in religious education are developed by early childhood educators in response to children's evolving developmental needs. Likewise, limited attention has been given to how such innovations are implemented in classroom practice, the factors that facilitate or hinder their implementation, and how educators themselves interpret the innovation process within the context of early childhood education (Anwar, 2026; Izzatunnisa & Mutiawati, 2024; Mutia & Bantali, 2026).

This research gap highlights the need for studies that move beyond evaluating the effectiveness of individual teaching methods toward understanding educational innovation as a dynamic and context-dependent process. A qualitative approach is therefore considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences, perceptions, creativity, and authentic practices in designing and implementing religious education that is responsive to the developmental characteristics of young children. Through such exploration, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the forms of educational innovation, their implementation processes, supporting and inhibiting factors, and their implications for strengthening children's religious values.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to explore educational innovations in early childhood education that strengthen children's religious values through a qualitative approach. The findings are expected to contribute to the theoretical development of religious values education in early childhood settings while also providing practical recommendations for teachers, school leaders, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing more innovative, contextual, and developmentally appropriate approaches to religious education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to gain an in-depth understanding of educational innovations implemented in early childhood education (ECE) to strengthen children's religious values. A qualitative exploratory approach was selected because the study sought to explore various forms of educational innovation, their implementation processes, supporting factors, challenges, and the meanings attributed by educators to these practices. This design enables researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon that is still evolving and has received limited scholarly attention.

The study was conducted in an Islamic kindergarten located in Pancoran, South Jakarta, Indonesia, which has implemented several innovative religious education programs. The research site was selected using purposive sampling because of its distinctive characteristics, particularly its flagship programs in strengthening religious values through Qur'anic memorization (*tahfiz*), daily prayers, and the memorization of selected *hadith*. These programs are integrated into children's daily learning experiences and school culture rather than being taught as separate subjects.

Research participants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of the principal, classroom teachers, and parents who were actively involved in implementing

the school's religious education programs. During the data collection process, snowball sampling was employed when additional participants were identified as having relevant experiences or information that could enrich the findings.

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation was conducted to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how educational innovations were implemented in everyday classroom activities and school routines. In-depth interviews explored participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategies regarding the implementation of innovative approaches to strengthening children's religious values. Document analysis included curriculum documents, lesson plans, weekly and daily learning plans, teaching modules, photographs, videos of learning activities, school regulations, and other relevant institutional documents that supported the interpretation of the findings.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of four interconnected processes: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. This analytical framework enabled the researcher to organize, interpret, and validate the findings systematically throughout the research process.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed, including source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research findings.

Because qualitative research does not employ variables in the same manner as quantitative studies, this study was guided by several research focuses. These included: (1) forms of educational innovation in strengthening religious values in early childhood education; (2) the implementation process of these innovations; (3) the roles of teachers, school leaders, and parents in supporting religious values education; (4) factors facilitating the implementation of educational innovations; (5) challenges encountered during implementation; and (6) the perceived impact of these innovations on children's religious values development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted at an Islamic kindergarten located in Pancoran, South Jakarta, Indonesia. The school was purposively selected because it possesses characteristics that align with the objectives of this study, particularly its implementation of various educational innovations aimed at strengthening religious values among young children. One of the school's flagship programs is Qur'anic memorization (Tahfiz), which has been specifically designed to accommodate the developmental characteristics of early childhood learners. Rather than merely emphasizing memorization targets, the program integrates play-based activities, repetition, habituation, and positive motivation, thereby transforming the memorization process into a meaningful learning experience for children.

In addition to the Tahfiz program, the school implements various religious activities as an integral part of daily learning. These include the habituation of daily prayers before and after classroom activities, memorization of selected Hadith related to moral values and everyday life, simple worship practices, and the cultivation of Islamic manners (*adab*) through daily social interactions. Religious values are not taught as an independent subject; instead, they are embedded throughout all learning activities, enabling children to internalize Islamic teachings through authentic daily experiences. This holistic



approach reflects previous findings suggesting that religious education in early childhood is most effective when implemented through meaningful experiences and continuous habituation (Anwar, 2026; Muzakkir & Muhammad, 2024).

The teaching staff at the school also demonstrates unique characteristics. Most teachers do not possess formal academic qualifications in Early Childhood Education; instead, they come from diverse educational backgrounds, particularly Islamic education. Nevertheless, classroom observations indicate that teachers consistently strive to understand children's developmental characteristics by implementing child-centered learning approaches, providing developmentally appropriate stimulation, and fostering warm and supportive relationships with children. Teachers also actively participate in professional development activities, engage in collegial discussions, and continuously reflect on their teaching practices to improve their pedagogical competence. These findings indicate that effective teaching is influenced not only by teachers' academic backgrounds but also by their willingness to engage in lifelong professional learning, consistent with Shulman's concept of pedagogical content knowledge.

The children enrolled in the kindergarten come from diverse social, economic, cultural, and religious family backgrounds. This diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for the school in designing inclusive and adaptive learning experiences. Consequently, teachers are required to accommodate individual children's needs while maintaining the primary goal of fostering religious character. From Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems perspective, children's development is shaped by interactions among family, school, and community environments. Therefore, collaboration between the school and families is essential to ensure that the internalization of religious values occurs consistently across children's different ecological contexts.

The school's culture places religious values at the center of all educational activities. Teachers serve as *uswah hasanah* (positive role models) by consistently demonstrating Islamic behaviors, including greeting others politely, speaking respectfully, maintaining cleanliness, respecting others, performing worship regularly, and cultivating honesty, trustworthiness, and responsibility. These values are communicated not only through explicit instruction but also through consistent modeling and daily habituation. Furthermore, the school's religious culture reflects the concept of the hidden curriculum, whereby values are transmitted through the school's climate, routines, interactions, and social norms rather than solely through formal instruction. Consequently, the school functions not merely as a place for religious knowledge transmission but as a learning ecosystem that supports children's everyday religious development.

Overall, the characteristics of this Islamic kindergarten—including its structured religious programs, strong religious school culture, committed teachers, and diverse student population—provide a rich context for exploring educational innovations aimed at strengthening religious values among young children.

1. Integration of Religious Values Across Learning Activities

The findings reveal that religious values are not taught as a separate subject but are integrated into all learning activities and the broader school culture. Teachers perceive Islamic values as inseparable from children's daily lives; therefore, every learning activity becomes an opportunity to nurture children's religious character.

This integration is evident in various daily practices, including reciting prayers before and after classroom activities, connecting learning topics with relevant Qur'anic verses and Hadith, encouraging children to greet others, maintaining cleanliness as part of faith, and promoting honesty, discipline, and responsibility

throughout play activities. Teachers also utilize naturally occurring classroom situations to connect children's experiences with Islamic teachings, thereby creating contextual and meaningful learning experiences.

These findings indicate that religious values are positioned not merely as knowledge to be memorized but as lived experiences practiced in children's everyday lives. This approach is consistent with the principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), which emphasize meaningful, experience-based learning aligned with children's developmental characteristics. Furthermore, the findings support Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which argues that knowledge and values are constructed through social interaction. They also reinforce previous studies demonstrating that integrating Islamic values throughout the curriculum is more effective than teaching religion as an isolated subject (Anwar, 2026; Saputri et al., 2026).

2. Innovative Play-Based Learning Strategies

The findings further indicate that teachers implemented a variety of innovative instructional strategies to strengthen children's religious values. These strategies included Islamic storytelling, role-playing, simple experiments, project-based learning, and collaborative games, all designed according to semester learning themes.

Through storytelling, teachers introduced stories of the Prophets, the Prophet's companions, and other inspirational Islamic narratives that conveyed moral lessons. These storytelling sessions were followed by discussions and play activities that encouraged children to reflect upon and apply the values presented in the stories. During role-playing activities, children enacted everyday social situations such as sharing food, apologizing, helping friends, and respecting parents, allowing them to experience religious values directly through social interaction.

Teachers also implemented simple projects, such as creating posters about cleanliness as part of faith, planting flowers as an expression of gratitude to Allah, and organizing food-sharing activities. Collaborative games were designed to promote cooperation, empathy, and responsibility as essential components of Islamic character.

These findings demonstrate that play-based learning serves not only cognitive development but also provides an effective medium for internalizing religious values. They are consistent with previous studies showing that role-playing enhances children's moral understanding and prosocial behavior (Hasan et al., 2026). Moreover, the findings align with the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, both of whom emphasize play as a fundamental context for children's cognitive and social development.

3. Internalization of Religious Values through Habituation

The study identified habituation as the primary strategy for internalizing religious values. Daily routines included reciting prayers, greeting others with Islamic salutations, performing congregational prayers, giving charity every Friday, waiting patiently in line, sharing food with peers, and expressing gratitude after receiving assistance.

Teachers believed that continuous repetition of positive behaviors gradually transformed these behaviors into children's habits and eventually into their character. Importantly, each routine was accompanied by simple explanations regarding its



meaning and moral significance, enabling children to understand why these practices were important.

These findings support previous research indicating that consistent religious habituation plays a significant role in children's character development (Mutia & Bantali, 2026; Muzakkir & Muhammad, 2024). They also correspond with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that children acquire behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement.

4. Teachers as Agents of Educational Innovation

The findings demonstrate that teachers play a central role as agents of educational innovation. Although many teachers lack formal qualifications in Early Childhood Education, they continuously develop their professional competence by modifying instructional media, reflecting on classroom practices, and adapting teaching methods to children's developmental needs.

Teachers regularly evaluated the effectiveness of learning activities and revised their instructional strategies whenever children's engagement declined. They also creatively designed teaching materials using inexpensive and locally available resources, ensuring that learning remained meaningful despite limited facilities.

These findings are consistent with Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory, which emphasizes the importance of individuals' capacity to adopt, adapt, and disseminate innovative practices. Likewise, Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner highlights continuous reflection as a hallmark of professional teaching practice.

5. School–Parent Collaboration

Another important finding concerns the strong collaboration between the school and parents in strengthening children's religious values. This collaboration was facilitated through communication books, monthly parenting programs, home-based worship projects, and documentation of children's classroom activities shared with parents.

Teachers emphasized that regular communication with parents ensured that religious habits established at school continued consistently at home. Such consistency enabled children to experience religious values across multiple learning environments.

These findings support previous studies demonstrating that consistency between school and family environments is essential for children's religious character development (Izzatunnisa & Mutiawati, 2024; Zakiyyah, 2024). Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory explains that effective collaboration between home and school strengthens the **mesosystem**, thereby supporting children's holistic moral and religious development.

6. Challenges in Implementing Educational Innovation

Despite the successful implementation of various educational innovations, the study also identified several challenges. These included limited learning resources, variations in teachers' pedagogical competence, insufficient parental involvement, and the growing influence of digital media on children's behavior.

Limited instructional resources encouraged teachers to develop learning materials independently, whereas differences in teachers' pedagogical competence highlighted the need for continuous professional development. Furthermore, some parents were unable to consistently reinforce religious habits at home because of limited time or insufficient understanding of early childhood education. Uncontrolled

exposure to digital media also emerged as a significant challenge in maintaining the consistency of religious values cultivated at school.

These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that successful religious and moral education requires adequate instructional resources, competent teachers, and strong family engagement (Istiyani et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study explored educational innovations implemented in an Islamic kindergarten to strengthen religious values among young children. The findings demonstrate that religious education is most effective when it is integrated into all aspects of children's learning experiences rather than being taught as a separate subject. The school established a holistic religious learning environment in which Islamic values were embedded within classroom instruction, daily routines, social interactions, and the broader school culture. Such an approach enabled children to internalize religious values through meaningful experiences and consistent practice.

The study identified six key dimensions of educational innovation. First, religious values were integrated across all learning activities, ensuring that every classroom experience became an opportunity for character development. Second, teachers implemented innovative play-based learning strategies—including Islamic storytelling, role-playing, simple experiments, project-based learning, and collaborative games—to facilitate meaningful and enjoyable religious learning. Third, the internalization of religious values was reinforced through continuous habituation, including daily prayers, congregational worship, charitable activities, sharing, gratitude, and other positive social behaviors. Fourth, teachers played a central role as agents of innovation by continuously adapting instructional strategies, modifying learning media, and reflecting on their teaching practices to meet children's developmental needs. Fifth, strong collaboration between the school and parents contributed significantly to the consistency of religious education across school and home environments. Finally, several challenges were identified, including limited instructional resources, variations in teachers' pedagogical competence, inconsistent parental involvement, and the growing influence of digital media on children's behavior.

The findings suggest that strengthening religious values in early childhood requires a comprehensive educational ecosystem that combines innovative pedagogy, a supportive school culture, teacher professionalism, and active family engagement. Religious values are more likely to be internalized when children experience them through authentic, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate learning activities rather than through rote memorization or procedural religious instruction alone.

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on religious values education in early childhood by proposing that educational innovation should be understood as a multidimensional process involving curriculum integration, play-based pedagogy, teacher creativity, school culture, and family partnerships. These interconnected dimensions provide a conceptual framework for designing holistic religious education that responds to the developmental needs of young children in contemporary society.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer valuable implications for teachers, school leaders, curriculum developers, and policymakers. Early childhood education institutions are encouraged to develop innovative, child-centered, and contextually meaningful learning environments that integrate religious values throughout children's



daily experiences. Future research is recommended to examine the effectiveness of these innovations across different educational settings and cultural contexts, as well as to investigate their long-term impact on children's character development and religious identity.

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