

## Internalization of Religious Values in the Formation of Empathetic Character in Early Childhood: A Qualitative Study at RA Falahul Mukminin 02

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the process of internalizing religious values in the formation of empathetic character in early childhood at RA Falahul Mukminin 02, Semarang Regency. The study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with class teachers, the principal, and parents, observations of children's behavior, and analysis of learning documents and teaching modules. The results showed that internalization of religious values was carried out through exemplary methods, religious habits, social activities based on concrete actions such as Friday alms, sharing food, praying for sick friends, and practicing communal worship. The findings showed changes in children's prosocial behavior, such as the ability to share, help friends, show concern for living things, and sensitivity to the social conditions around them. The success of internalizing empathy values is greatly influenced by the consistency of habits at school and collaboration with parents at home. This study confirms that contextual and practice-based religious learning is effective in building empathetic character from an early age.

**Keywords:** *Internalization of Religious Values, Empathy, Early Childhood Character, Religious Learning.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Character development in early childhood constitutes a fundamental foundation for shaping personality and social behavior in later life. Among the various dimensions of character that must be instilled from an early age, empathy occupies a particularly strategic position. Empathy is not merely the ability to understand others' feelings; it also encompasses emotional sensitivity, social concern, and readiness to engage in prosocial behavior. In the context of early childhood education, empathy serves as a key indicator of healthy social relationships, reduction of aggressive behavior, and strengthening of interpersonal communication skills.

Developmental studies indicate that empathic ability begins to develop significantly during the preschool years. Hoffman (2000) explains that empathy develops gradually, beginning with simple emotional responses to others' expressions and progressing toward more complex perspective-taking abilities. When children experience being understood or observe others being treated empathetically, they gradually develop both understanding and a tendency to demonstrate empathy in daily life (Nugroho & Mulyani, 2021). Between the ages of 4 and 6, children begin to recognize emotional expressions, understand causal relationships behind others' feelings, and demonstrate simple actions such as helping or comforting a distressed peer. This phase represents a critical period in social character formation, as children are internalizing norms and values through intensive social interactions within their environment.

In the context of Islamic education, empathy forms an integral component of noble character (*akhlaq*), rooted in religious values (Barotuttaqiyah & Muniroh, 2024). Concepts such as *rahmah* (compassion), *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), *ukhuwah* (brotherhood), and *ihsan* (benevolence) embody moral principles that inherently contain empathic dimensions. These values must not merely be understood as normative teachings but must be internalized through sustained educational processes. Internalization of religious values refers to the process by which values become embedded within an individual's self-awareness, belief system, and behavioral patterns. This process involves cognitive aspects (understanding of values), affective aspects (emotional appreciation), and conative aspects (concrete action).

However, a major challenge in character education lies in transforming normative values into observable behavior. Many religious learning practices remain cognitively and ritualistically oriented—such as memorization of prayers or Qur'anic verses—without providing sufficient social experiences to cultivate empathic character. Lickona (2012) emphasizes that character education becomes effective when it encompasses moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In other words, children must not only know religious teachings but also internalize their meaning emotionally and practice them in everyday life.

Within the Indonesian early childhood education framework, the integration of character values into the curriculum has become a national priority. The PAUD (Early Childhood Education) curriculum emphasizes the development of religious and moral values as a core developmental domain. Nevertheless, implementation varies significantly depending on institutional policy, teacher competence, and family support. Therefore, contextual research that documents concrete practices of religious value internalization in fostering empathy is essential to enrich the literature and provide empirically grounded models that may be replicated.

This study focuses on RA Falahul Mukminin 02 Padaan, Pabelan District, Semarang Regency. Based on preliminary observations and interviews, the institution implements several religious learning programs integrated with empathy-building activities, including weekly charity initiatives (*Jumat Berkah*), collective prayers for sick peers, food-sharing activities,

communal environmental clean-ups, and congregational worship practices. The instructional module entitled “Masjidku Luar Biasa” demonstrates that religious instruction extends beyond ritual orientation to include habituation of social attitudes and environmental care.

Preliminary findings indicate systematic efforts to internalize religious values through direct experience. Children are not only guided to recite prayers or memorize short Qur’anic chapters but are also actively involved in sharing and helping activities. Observations reveal behaviors such as sharing learning tools, comforting crying peers, setting aside pocket money for charity, and demonstrating care for plants and animals. These behaviors represent concrete indicators of empathy manifested in prosocial action.

Theoretically, the process of value internalization can be explained through Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that children learn through observation and imitation of significant models (Irama et al., 2024). Teachers, as authoritative figures, play a central role in modeling empathic behavior. When teachers demonstrate care, assist struggling students, or actively participate in social activities, children are likely to imitate these behaviors. Thus, modeling becomes a primary strategy in the internalization of religious values.

Additionally, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1986) explains that children’s character development is shaped by interactions across multiple environmental systems, including the family (microsystem), school (microsystem), and the interrelationship between them (mesosystem) (Desmita, 2013). In this study’s context, active communication between school and parents through WhatsApp groups and developmental reports reflects synergy between home and school environments. Such collaboration reinforces the consistency of empathy-related habituation across both settings.

Previous research on religion-based character education indicates that participatory social activities significantly influence children’s empathy development (Eisenberg, 2006). Children who regularly engage in sharing and helping behaviors demonstrate more pronounced prosocial tendencies compared to those who receive only verbal advice or instruction. Eisenberg’s work highlights that children learn empathy and moral values more effectively through experiential moral learning rather than purely theoretical instruction (Arifin, 2021). Through direct action, children are able to feel and understand others’ emotions more deeply. These experiences facilitate internalization of empathy, cooperation, and social responsibility (Khoeriyah & Harahap, 2020; Juliwati & Suharnan, 2014).

Nevertheless, the internalization process is not without challenges. Variations in family background, parenting styles, and individual child characteristics may influence the effectiveness of empathy habituation. Some children may come from environments that already foster caring behavior, while others may lack such experiences at home. This diversity necessitates adaptive and reflective pedagogical strategies from teachers.

In this context, it becomes crucial to examine in depth how the process of religious value internalization is implemented at RA Falahul Mukminin 02, how instructional strategies are designed and executed, and how these practices impact the development of empathic character among children. This study aims not only to describe existing practices but also to analyze them through theoretical frameworks and relevant research in order to generate comprehensive understanding.

The contribution of this research lies in reinforcing the paradigm that religious learning in early childhood education must be contextual, reflective, and grounded in social experience. The internalization of religious values cannot be achieved through lecture-based approaches alone but requires integration of modeling, habituation, and consistent real-life practice.

Accordingly, this study is expected to provide a relevant and applicable practical model for early childhood institutions seeking to cultivate empathy from an early age.

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to in-depth explore the process of internalizing religious values in developing empathetic character in early childhood. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the phenomenon contextually, holistically, and naturally within a real-life educational setting. The case study was used to describe in detail the religious learning practices implemented at RA Falahul Mukminin 02, Semarang Regency.

The research was conducted from November 22–28, 2025, at RA Falahul Mukminin 02 Padaan, Pabelan District, Semarang Regency. The research subjects consisted of three key informants selected purposively based on their strategic roles in implementing and strengthening religious education at the institution: (1) the classroom teacher as the implementer of religious learning (N1), (2) the principal as the person responsible for policy and curriculum (N2), and (3) the parents as representatives of the family environment (N3).

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, observations of children's behavior, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore the informants' understanding of the concept of empathy, religious learning strategies, indicators of changes in children's behavior, and challenges faced. Direct observations were made of children's learning activities and behaviors during activities such as sharing, helping friends, praying together, and community service. The documentation analyzed included the "My Mosque is Extraordinary" teaching module, the "Friday Blessings" program, and records of social activities and child development assessments.

Data analysis was conducted through iterative stages of data reduction, thematic categorization, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The analysis process followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, emphasizing the identification of key themes such as the meaning of empathy, value internalization strategies, changes in prosocial behavior, and supporting and inhibiting factors. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation (teachers, principals, and parents), technical triangulation (interviews, observation, documentation), and member checking. With this approach, the research yielded a comprehensive understanding of the practice of internalizing religious values in shaping the empathetic character of early childhood, contextually and in-depth.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

The findings of this study were derived from in-depth interviews with the classroom teacher (N1), the principal (N2), and a parent representative (N3), direct observation of children's behavior during religious learning activities, and analysis of instructional documents such as teaching modules and school programs at RA Falahul Mukminin 02, Semarang Regency. The collected data indicate that the internalization of religious values in shaping empathetic character is conducted through systematic, well-planned, and integrated daily activities.

Based on interview results, the classroom teacher explained that empathy is understood as the child's ability to feel others' emotions and demonstrate care through concrete actions, such as helping peers who experience difficulties, sharing food, or comforting a crying friend. The principal reinforced this perspective by emphasizing that empathy constitutes the foundation of noble character (*akhlaq*) and must be instilled from an early age due to its long-

term influence on children's social competence. Meanwhile, parents reported observable changes in their children's behavior at home, including helping organize household items, showing affection toward younger siblings, and consciously reminding family members to give charity.

Observational findings demonstrate that the internalization process occurs through consistent habituation. Each morning, children are accustomed to greeting one another, smiling at peers, and participating in collective prayer before beginning activities. During these moments, teachers frequently connect prayers with values of care—for example, inviting children to pray for a sick classmate. In one observation, when a child was absent due to illness, the teacher encouraged the class to pray for the child's recovery. After the prayer, several children spontaneously expressed a desire to visit their friend. This response suggests that empathy began to develop through shared emotional experiences.

The thematic learning activities documented in the instructional module entitled "Masjidku Luar Biasa" further illustrate the integration of worship values with social concern. On the sixth day of instruction, children participated in a communal activity to clean the mosque environment and share food together. Observations revealed that most children actively engaged in cleaning classroom and school areas without coercion. When one child struggled to carry cleaning equipment, two other children assisted without teacher prompting. The teacher then provided verbal reinforcement, stating that helping others is an action beloved by Allah. This reinforcement strengthened the association between empathic behavior and religious values.

The Jumat Berkah (Blessed Friday) program emerged as a significant finding in this study. Based on observation and documentation, every Friday children bring pocket money to set aside for charity. They take turns placing money into a donation box while the teacher explains in simple terms that the funds will be used to help those in need. Initial observations showed that some children were reluctant to donate. However, after observing peers participate and receive praise from the teacher, they eventually contributed as well. This pattern indicates the operation of modeling and social reinforcement in the internalization of empathic values.

Interviews with parents further revealed the program's tangible impact. Parents reported that their children began requesting to set aside pocket money at home and asking whether the family had given charity that day. One parent shared that her child once voluntarily shared food with a neighbor, explaining that she felt happy when sharing at school. These findings indicate that empathic values extended beyond the school environment into daily home behavior.

Observations of prosocial behavior in classroom activities also demonstrated notable changes. During food-sharing sessions, children were asked to sit in a circle and distribute snacks in turns. In early observations, some children tended to share only with close friends; however, in subsequent sessions, children began distributing food more equally. Teachers actively reminded students of the importance of sharing with everyone without discrimination. Similarly, during classroom clean-up activities, children were observed helping each other organize books and crayons after use. Teachers noted that previously some children often left materials scattered, but after consistent habituation and reinforcement of responsibility values, such behavior declined.

In environmental care activities, children were invited to water plants and feed the school's animals. During these activities, teachers explained that caring for plants and animals is part of religious teaching. Children demonstrated enthusiasm, and some showed particular attentiveness by ensuring plants received sufficient water. When one animal appeared hungry,

a child alerted the teacher, stating that the animal needed more food. Such actions reflect emerging emotional sensitivity toward living beings.

Analysis of formative assessment documents revealed that teachers utilized anecdotal records to document empathic behaviors. Entries included examples such as “Child helped a friend pick up a fallen bag” and “Child comforted a crying friend by gently patting their shoulder.” This documentation indicates that empathy is treated as a key developmental indicator rather than a supplementary aspect of evaluation.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal variations in empathy levels among children. Teachers reported that some children who received limited habituation at home exhibited slower responses to sharing activities. Observations showed that children with more individualistic tendencies were more inclined to retain personal belongings and required more intensive guidance. Teachers addressed this through dialogical approaches, explaining the benefits of sharing and inviting children to reflect on how it feels to receive help from others.

Collaboration between school and parents emerged as a major supporting factor in strengthening value internalization. The principal explained that routine communication via WhatsApp groups is used to inform parents about character values being emphasized at school. Parents are encouraged to reinforce these habits at home, such as inviting children to share with siblings or neighbors. Interview findings indicate that consistency between school and home environments accelerates behavioral change.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the internalization of religious values in shaping empathy at RA Falahul Mukminin 02 is achieved through a combination of teacher modeling, religious habituation, participatory social activities, and collaboration with parents. Observations of children’s behavior reveal concrete changes manifested in sharing, helping, comforting, and caring for the environment. Documentation and assessment records further confirm that empathy constitutes an integral component of religious learning practices within the institution.

## **Discussion**

### **1. Internalization of Religious Values as an Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Process**

The findings of this study indicate that the internalization of religious values in shaping empathy at RA Falahul Mukminin 02 extends beyond the verbal transmission of religious knowledge. Rather, it encompasses a process that simultaneously engages cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Children are not merely introduced to concepts such as sharing or helping others as religious teachings; they are actively involved in concrete experiences that evoke emotional responses and prosocial actions.

These findings align with Lickona’s (2012) character education framework, which emphasizes that moral education must include three essential components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In this study, moral knowing is reflected in children’s understanding of the meaning of charity (*sedekah*), sharing, and helping others. Moral feeling emerges when children demonstrate empathy toward sick or distressed peers. Moral action is manifested in behaviors such as sharing food, helping organize learning materials, and setting aside pocket money for charitable contributions.

Furthermore, the observation that children display empathic behaviors at home reinforces the indication that value internalization has reached the stage of personal integration. According to Deci and Ryan’s (2012) Self-Determination Theory, values initially regulated externally can become internalized into self-regulation when supported by meaningful experiences and consistent social reinforcement. In this study, the Jumat Berkah program and

food-sharing activities function as repeated experiential practices that gradually integrate empathy into children's emerging identities.

Thus, the internalization process identified in this study demonstrates successful integration between religious teachings and social practice. Religious education is no longer limited to ritual memorization but functions as a transformative medium oriented toward socially responsible behavior.

## **2. The Role of Modeling and Teacher Exemplification in Empathy Formation**

The findings reveal that teachers play a central role as models in the development of children's empathy. When teachers assist children who encounter difficulties, comfort those who cry, and provide appreciation for sharing behaviors, children tend to imitate these actions. This process can be analyzed through Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Schunk, 2012), which posits that children learn through observation and imitation of significant figures. Modeling is particularly effective when the model possesses credibility, emotional closeness, and behavioral consistency.

Research by Won et al. (2017) demonstrates that students' perceptions of teacher credibility significantly influence the effectiveness of social persuasion in enhancing academic self-efficacy. When students trust the competence and integrity of their teachers, they become more motivated and confident, ultimately improving academic performance. Similarly, Brewer and Wann (1998) found that characteristics such as perceived attractiveness and competence of the model increase student attention during learning. The higher the credibility of the model, the greater the likelihood that observed behaviors will be imitated.

In the context of RA Falahul Mukminin 02, teachers interact intensively with children on a daily basis, positioning them as both authoritative and affective figures. When teachers explicitly associate helping behavior with religious virtue—such as stating that helping others is beloved by Allah—children perceive empathic behavior not only as a social norm but also as a religiously meaningful act.

Previous research by Shi and Ettekal (2021) indicates that positive teacher–student relationships are associated with better academic achievement and lower levels of emotional problems such as anxiety and depression across grade levels. Liu et al. (2024) further emphasize that teacher–student closeness influences learning approaches and the development of prosocial behavior. Rucinski et al. (2018) found that high-quality teacher–child relationships predict social-emotional development, while Hughes and Kwok (2007) highlight the strong link between teacher relationship quality and academic engagement, particularly among initially low-achieving students.

Prosocial behaviors—such as sharing, helping, and cooperating—are significantly shaped by children's interactions with teachers. Shi et al. (2020) explain that positive early school relationships contribute to sustained prosocial development into adulthood. Goble et al. (2019) also note that strong teacher–student relationships reduce negative externalizing behaviors, which typically hinder prosocial development. Vatou (2020) adds that children's perceptions of teacher relationships influence overall learning experiences and social adaptability, serving as protective factors in stressful situations.

In addition to modeling, positive reinforcement plays an important role. Skinner's (1953) behaviorist theory posits that behaviors followed by reinforcement are more likely to be repeated. Verbal affirmations such as “excellent,” “well done,” or “thank you for sharing” have proven effective in encouraging children to repeat caring behaviors (Dewi et al., 2025). Mahbubah et al. (2023) found that teacher verbal reinforcement directly influences student behavior, increasing not only learning motivation but also empathy and cooperation. When

children receive positive acknowledgment for empathic actions, they associate such behaviors with pleasant emotional experiences.

Interestingly, in this study, empathic behavior was not driven solely by external reinforcement but also by internalized religious understanding. This indicates a synthesis between behaviorist reinforcement and deeper value internalization. Consequently, teacher modeling emerges as a key element in religious value internalization, positioning teachers not merely as instructional facilitators but as living representations of empathy.

### **3. Experiential Learning as an Effective Strategy for Cultivating Empathy**

A significant finding of this study is the use of action-based activities—such as charity, food-sharing, communal cleaning, and environmental care—as media for empathy education. This approach can be analyzed through Kolb’s experiential learning framework (Aini & Nugroho, 2025), which emphasizes that effective learning occurs through direct experience followed by reflection.

Children were not simply instructed to share; they directly experienced the act of sharing and its emotional impact. When children set aside pocket money for charity and receive positive feedback from teachers and peers, they undergo emotional experiences that reinforce empathic values. Teacher-led reflections—such as asking children how they felt after sharing—serve as crucial stages in constructing meaning from these experiences.

Eisenberg and Miller’s research (Wulandari & Satiningsih, 2019) demonstrates that direct participation in prosocial activities correlates positively with increased empathy and altruistic behavior. Children who routinely engage in sharing activities show greater concern in diverse social contexts. The present findings confirm this pattern, as children displayed empathic behaviors not only at school but also at home.

Environmental and animal-care activities further expand empathy from interpersonal relationships to ecological awareness. Research by Kim and Paik (2023) shows that empathy-based ecological programs significantly enhance students’ environmental perspectives through experiential learning. Such programs integrate scientific knowledge with moral considerations, fostering both cognitive understanding and ethical responsibility. This evidence suggests a close relationship between empathy development and ecological consciousness.

Thus, experiential learning effectively transforms religious values into concrete empathic behavior. This approach renders religious education more contextual and meaningful for early childhood learners.

### **4. School–Family Synergy in Strengthening Value Internalization**

The findings highlight collaboration between school and parents as a key supporting factor in successful empathy internalization. Communication through WhatsApp groups enables teachers to inform parents about character values emphasized at school, allowing reinforcement at home. This dynamic aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which underscores the importance of interactions between school and family microsystems (mesosystem) in child development (Ibda, 2022).

When empathy values taught at school are reinforced at home, consistent experiences accelerate internalization. Conversely, inconsistency between environments may create value confusion. In this study, parents reported increased sharing and caring behaviors at home, indicating effective synergy.

Hill and Tyson (2009) demonstrate that parental involvement in character education significantly influences children’s social development. Children who receive consistent

reinforcement across home and school contexts exhibit greater stability in prosocial behavior. The findings of this study align with this conclusion, as behavioral changes were observed across both settings.

However, variations in parenting styles affected the pace of internalization. Some children required more intensive guidance due to limited habituation at home. This indicates that, despite established synergy, adaptive and individualized approaches remain necessary.

In summary, the internalization of religious values in shaping empathy at RA Falahul Mukminin 02 represents a multidimensional process involving teacher modeling, experiential activities, social reinforcement, and family collaboration. These findings reinforce the literature suggesting that contextual, practice-based religious education holds substantial potential in fostering sustainable empathic character development in early childhood.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research shows that the internalization of religious values in developing empathetic character in early childhood at RA Falahul Mukminin 02, Semarang Regency, occurs through a systematic, contextual process based on real-life experiences. Internalization occurs not only through the cognitive delivery of religious material, but also through the integration of teacher role models, religious habits, action-based social activities, and consistent collaboration between the school and family. This process allows empathy to gradually develop from conceptual understanding to affective attitudes and ultimately manifest in concrete prosocial behavior.

Observational findings indicate that children are beginning to demonstrate empathetic behaviors such as sharing food, helping friends tidy up their learning materials, comforting crying friends, setting aside pocket money for charity, and caring for plants and animals. These behavioral changes indicate that the internalization of values has reached the stage of concrete action (moral action), not merely moral knowledge. Programs such as Friday Blessings, praying together for sick friends, and community service activities to clean up the environment are effective ways to reinforce children's empathetic experiences repeatedly and meaningfully.

Analysis of the research results confirms that the role of teachers as role models is crucial to the success of empathy development. Consistent role modeling and positive reinforcement help children understand the relationship between religious values and social action. Furthermore, an experiential learning approach has been shown to be more effective than verbal instructional methods. Children who are directly involved in social activities more easily internalize the meaning of empathy as part of their identity.

Collaboration between schools and parents is also a key factor in maintaining value consistency. Regular communication allows the habit of empathy at school to be reinforced at home, allowing the internalization process to continue in the child's two primary environments. Despite challenges such as differences in character and parenting styles, the dialogical and reflective approach implemented by teachers gradually overcomes these obstacles.

Overall, this study confirms that contextual, participatory, and action-based religious learning contributes significantly to shaping empathetic character in early childhood. The model of internalizing religious values implemented at RA Falahul Mukminin 02 can serve as a reference for other early childhood education institutions in developing authentic and sustainable character education.

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