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# A COMPARATIVE REALIST EVALUATION OF RELIGIOUS CHARACTER EDUCATION IN INDONESIAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

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## ABSTRACT

Strengthening students' moral and ethical development has become a growing concern in contemporary education systems. Religious character education is widely promoted as a strategy to foster students' moral awareness and social responsibility; however, many existing studies remain descriptive and provide limited explanation of how such programs operate across different institutional contexts. This study aims to analyze the implementation of religious character education in public high schools using a comparative realist evaluation approach. The research was conducted in three public high schools in South Kalimantan, Indonesia: SMAN 2 Banjarbaru, SMAN 4 Banjarmasin, and SMAN 1 Bati-Bati. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving school leaders and teachers responsible for religious education programs. The analysis employed the Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) framework to identify the causal processes underlying program implementation. The findings reveal three distinct patterns of implementation: institutional integration, ritual habituation, and managerial adaptation. These patterns demonstrate that the effectiveness of religious character education is shaped by the interaction between institutional context and the mechanisms activated within each school environment. This study contributes to the literature by proposing a contextual evaluation model that explains how religious character education programs operate across diverse educational settings and offers insights for policymakers and practitioners in designing adaptive character education strategies.

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**KEYWORDS:** Character Education; Realist Evaluation; Religious Character Education; School Culture.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Character education has become an increasingly important focus in educational systems worldwide, particularly in response to growing concerns regarding moral decline, social conflict, and behavioral problems among youth (Taja et al., 2021). Educational institutions are no longer expected to focus solely on academic achievement but are also required to cultivate ethical awareness, social responsibility, and moral integrity among students. In many societies, character education has been promoted as a strategic approach to developing responsible citizens who possess both intellectual competence and moral commitment. Within this framework, the integration of moral and spiritual values in education has attracted considerable attention among scholars and policymakers.

Religious character education represents one of the prominent approaches used to strengthen moral development in educational institutions. Religious values are often regarded as an essential foundation for shaping students' ethical behavior, discipline, empathy, and social responsibility. Through the integration of religious teachings into school culture, curriculum, and daily practices, educational institutions aim to foster moral awareness and internalize positive values among students (Wulandari, 2022). Previous studies suggest that religious character education can contribute significantly to the formation of students' moral identity and pro-social behavior, particularly when supported by consistent institutional practices and positive role models within the school environment.

In Indonesia, character education has been formally institutionalized through national education policies that emphasize the integration of moral and religious values within the education system. Religious character constitutes one of the core values promoted within the national character education framework. Schools are encouraged to integrate religious values not only through classroom instruction but also through extracurricular activities, school rituals, and institutional culture (Ismail Hamdani, 2025). Various programs such as collective prayers, Qur'anic recitation, religious mentoring, and moral guidance activities are commonly implemented to support the internalization of religious values among students. These initiatives reflect the broader goal of Indonesian education policy to develop individuals who are intellectually capable, morally responsible, and spiritually grounded.

A number of studies have examined the implementation of religious character education in

schools. Previous research indicates that several factors play an important role in supporting the internalization of religious values, including the availability of religious facilities, the integration of religious values into the curriculum, and the presence of religious rituals within the school environment. School culture that emphasizes religious norms has been found to encourage students' discipline, honesty, and social responsibility (Warlim et al., 2026). In addition, the role of teachers as moral exemplars is frequently highlighted as a critical factor influencing students' attitudes and behaviors. These studies provide important insights into how religious values can be embedded within school practices to shape students' moral development.

However, despite the growing body of literature on religious character education, many existing studies remain largely descriptive in nature. Much of the research focuses on identifying the types of programs implemented in schools without examining the causal mechanisms that explain how and why such programs produce particular outcomes (Aydın & Şahin, 2025). Educational institutions operate within diverse contexts characterized by variations in leadership practices, infrastructure capacity, institutional culture, and student backgrounds. These contextual differences may influence the effectiveness of character education programs and shape the ways in which students respond to religious activities within the school environment. Consequently, understanding the implementation of religious character education requires an analytical approach that goes beyond descriptive accounts and explores the interaction between contextual conditions and underlying causal mechanisms.

Realist evaluation offers a useful framework for addressing this limitation (Kotten et al., 2025). The realist evaluation approach focuses on identifying the relationship between Context, Mechanism, and Outcome (CMO) in order to explain how and why a program works, for whom, and under what circumstances. Rather than simply assessing whether a program is effective, realist evaluation seeks to uncover the causal mechanisms that generate outcomes within particular institutional contexts (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). This approach has been widely applied in social policy and educational research to analyze complex interventions where outcomes are shaped by interactions between structural conditions and human agency. By examining CMO configurations, researchers are able to understand how contextual factors activate specific mechanisms that ultimately

lead to observable outcomes.

Applying realist evaluation to the study of religious character education provides an opportunity to better understand how institutional contexts influence the effectiveness of character education programs in schools (Susarno et al., 2025). Different schools may implement similar programs, yet the outcomes may vary depending on contextual conditions such as leadership support, organizational coordination, and infrastructure availability (Zainul, 2025). Exploring these variations through a realist evaluation lens can provide deeper insights into the mechanisms through which religious character education contributes to students' moral development.

Based on this perspective, the present study aims to examine the implementation of religious character education in public high schools through a comparative realist evaluation approach. The study focuses on three public high schools in South Kalimantan, Indonesia: SMAN 2 Banjarbaru, SMAN 4 Banjarmasin, and SMAN 1 Bati-Bati. These schools represent different institutional contexts, including variations in infrastructure support, curriculum integration, and internal management practices (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). By comparing these cases, the study seeks to identify the contextual conditions and mechanisms that influence the outcomes of religious character education programs.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is religious character education implemented in different public high school contexts?
2. What mechanisms activate the internalization of religious values among students?
3. How do contextual factors influence the outcomes of religious character education programs?

This study contributes to the literature on character education and educational evaluation in several ways. First, it extends the application of realist evaluation within the field of education, particularly in the study of religious character education. Second, it provides empirical evidence regarding how contextual variations across schools influence the mechanisms that shape students' moral and religious development. Third, the study proposes a contextual evaluation model that can inform policymakers and educational practitioners in designing more effective character education programs in public schools.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Religious Character Education in Schools

Character education has long been recognized as an essential component of holistic education. It aims to develop students not only intellectually but also morally and socially by cultivating values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and empathy (Fernández-Espinosa et al., 2026). Scholars emphasize that character education involves deliberate efforts by educational institutions to promote ethical behavior and moral awareness among students through both formal instruction and informal socialization processes within the school environment.

Religious character education represents a particular form of character education that integrates spiritual and moral values derived from religious teachings into educational practices. Religious values are often viewed as a strong moral foundation that shapes individual behavior and social interaction (Rachman, 2025). In many educational contexts, religious character education is implemented through a combination of curriculum integration, school culture, and religious activities designed to strengthen students' moral awareness and spiritual development.

Research on religious character education indicates that the internalization of religious values among students is strongly influenced by the broader school environment. Lickona argues that effective character education requires the creation of a moral community within schools where ethical values are consistently modeled and reinforced through daily practices (Putra et al., 2026). Similarly, Berkowitz and Bier highlight that character education programs are most effective when schools cultivate a supportive culture that encourages moral reflection, positive behavior, and shared responsibility among teachers and students.

Several empirical studies have demonstrated that religious practices within schools can significantly influence students' attitudes and behaviors (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Activities such as collective prayers, religious mentoring, and scriptural study are often used as mechanisms to foster discipline, self-control, and moral commitment among students. These activities not only reinforce religious identity but also promote social cohesion and ethical responsibility within the school community.

In addition to ritual practices, the role of teachers is widely recognized as a crucial factor in religious character education (Zekary et al., 2025). Teachers often serve as moral role models whose behavior and attitudes influence students' moral development. Studies have shown that students are more likely to

internalize moral values when teachers consistently demonstrate ethical conduct, empathy, and integrity in their interactions with students (Syahidah et al., 2025). Therefore, religious character education is not limited to religious instruction but also involves the cultivation of a school culture that reflects moral and spiritual values.

## **2.2 School Context and the Implementation of Character Education**

The effectiveness of character education programs is strongly shaped by the institutional context in which they are implemented. Schools differ in terms of leadership practices, infrastructure availability, organizational culture, and student demographics. These contextual factors may influence the ways in which character education programs are designed, implemented, and experienced by students.

School leadership plays a particularly important role in shaping the success of character education initiatives. Principals who actively support character education programs can foster a shared vision among teachers and encourage collaborative efforts to integrate moral values into school activities (Gamaputra et al., 2025). Leadership commitment can also influence the allocation of resources, the development of school policies, and the coordination of programs aimed at strengthening students' moral development.

Infrastructure and institutional resources also affect the implementation of religious character education. The availability of facilities such as prayer rooms, religious learning materials, and spaces for collective religious activities may facilitate the integration of religious practices within the school routine. Conversely, limited facilities may require schools to adopt adaptive strategies in implementing religious activities.

Another important contextual factor is the organizational culture of the school. School culture refers to the shared values, norms, and practices that guide the behavior of members within an institution (Dwi Novemyanto, 2025). Schools that cultivate a culture emphasizing moral values and mutual respect are more likely to create an environment where students feel encouraged to engage in ethical and socially responsible behavior.

These contextual variations highlight the importance of examining character education not merely as a set of programs but as a dynamic process shaped by interactions between institutional structures and social practices within schools.

## **2.3 Realist Evaluation and the Context–Mechanism–Outcome Framework**

Realist evaluation provides an analytical framework for understanding how complex social programs operate within different contexts. Developed by Pawson and Tilley, realist evaluation is based on the premise that social interventions do not work uniformly across all settings. Instead, outcomes emerge from the interaction between contextual conditions and the mechanisms activated by a particular program.

The central analytical tool in realist evaluation is the Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) configuration. Context refers to the structural and social conditions within which a program is implemented, including institutional resources, leadership practices, and organizational culture. Mechanism refers to the underlying processes that explain how participants respond to program interventions (Sweetman & O'Farrell, 2024). These mechanisms often involve changes in reasoning, motivation, or social interaction among participants. Outcome refers to the observable results produced by the interaction between contextual conditions and activated mechanisms.

In educational research, realist evaluation has been increasingly used to analyze complex interventions such as educational reforms, school-based health programs, and character education initiatives (Novianto et al., 2026). Rather than focusing solely on whether a program is effective, realist evaluation seeks to answer more nuanced questions, such as how a program works, for whom it works, and under what circumstances it produces desired outcomes.

Applying the realist evaluation framework to religious character education allows researchers to examine how different school contexts activate specific mechanisms that influence students' moral development (Weintraub, 2024). For example, strong leadership support may activate mechanisms of collective commitment among teachers, while ritual practices may foster habitual discipline among students (Rekan et al., 2025). By identifying these CMO configurations, researchers can develop a deeper understanding of how religious character education operates within diverse educational environments.

## **2.4 Research Framework**

Based on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, the implementation of religious character education can be understood as a complex interaction between institutional context, social mechanisms, and educational outcomes. Different contextual conditions may activate distinct mechanisms that shape students' engagement with religious values and moral practices.

This study adopts the realist evaluation framework to analyze how religious character education programs operate within different public school contexts (Astawa et al., 2025). By examining the configuration of context, mechanism, and outcome across three schools, the research aims to identify the causal processes that explain variations in the effectiveness of religious character education programs.

Based on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, the implementation of religious character education in schools can be understood as a complex interaction between institutional context, social mechanisms, and educational outcomes (Birgün, 2026). Schools operate within diverse structural and cultural environments that shape how character education programs are implemented and experienced by students. These contextual conditions

influence the activation of specific mechanisms such as teacher role modeling, ritual habituation, collective participation, and managerial coordination (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). The interaction between these contextual factors and mechanisms ultimately produces observable outcomes related to students’ religious discipline and the internalization of moral values.

To analyze these dynamics, this study adopts the Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) framework derived from realist evaluation (Afidah et al., 2024). The framework allows the study to examine how different school contexts activate particular mechanisms that influence the effectiveness of religious character education programs. The conceptual framework guiding this research is presented in Figure 1.

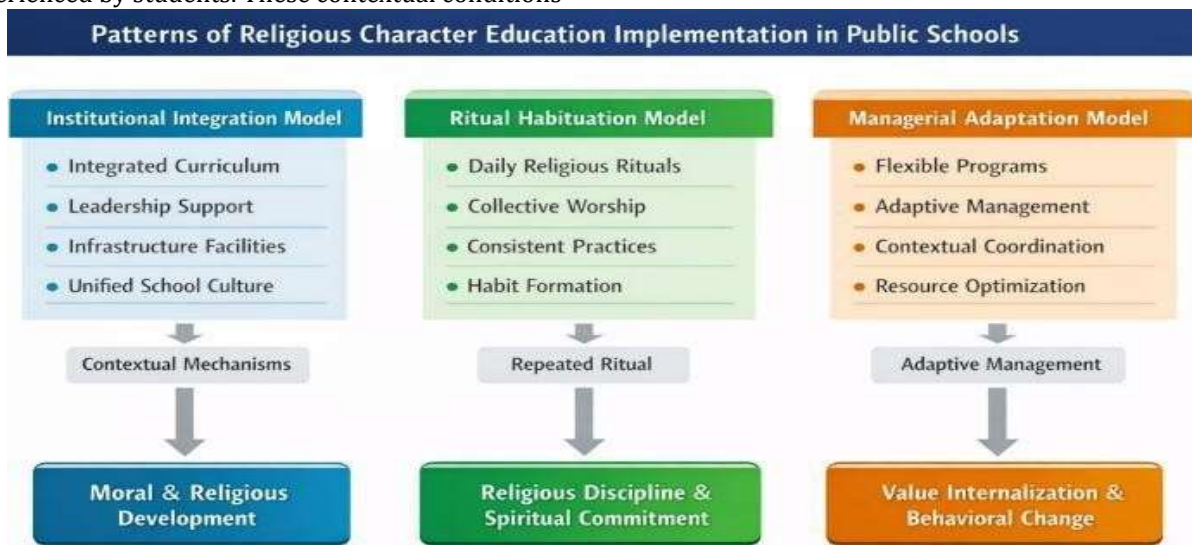


Figure 1:

As illustrated in Figure 1, the implementation of religious character education is influenced by the interaction between institutional context, activation mechanisms, and educational outcomes. School context refers to structural and organizational conditions such as leadership commitment, infrastructure availability, curriculum integration, and institutional policies that support the implementation of religious programs. These contextual factors shape the environment in which character education initiatives are carried out.

Within these contexts, specific mechanisms are activated through social interactions and institutional practices. Mechanisms such as teacher role modeling, ritual habituation, collective participation of school members, and adaptive managerial coordination function as processes that encourage students to engage with religious values in meaningful ways (Muflihin et al., 2024). These mechanisms influence

how students interpret, experience, and internalize religious practices within the school environment.

The interaction between context and mechanism ultimately generates outcomes related to students’ religious character development (Susanto, 2025). These outcomes may include increased ritual discipline, stronger internalization of moral and religious values, and greater awareness of ethical responsibility in daily behavior. By examining the configuration of context, mechanism, and outcome across different schools, this study seeks to explain how religious character education programs operate within diverse institutional settings.

### 3. METHODS

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using a comparative realist evaluation approach. Realist evaluation aims to explain how and why a

program works, for whom, and under what contextual conditions. Rather than focusing solely on whether an intervention is successful, realist evaluation examines the causal mechanisms that produce outcomes within specific contexts.

The analytical framework used in this study is the Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) configuration, which allows the researcher to explore how institutional contexts activate particular mechanisms that lead to specific outcomes. By applying this framework, the study seeks to understand how religious character education programs operate across different public school environments.

The research adopts a comparative case study strategy, examining three public high schools with distinct contextual characteristics in order to identify variations in the implementation of religious character education.

### 3.2 Research Sites

The study was conducted in three public high schools located in South Kalimantan, Indonesia:

1. SMAN 2 Banjarbaru – a school characterized by strong institutional support and adequate religious infrastructure.
2. SMAN 4 Banjarmasin – a school with limited religious facilities but intensive religious ritual practices.
3. SMAN 1 Bati-Bati – a school implementing adaptive managerial strategies due to limited resources.

These schools were selected using purposive sampling to represent different contextual conditions in the implementation of religious character education (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The variation in infrastructure availability, curriculum integration, and organizational management allowed the study to explore how different contexts influence the mechanisms and outcomes of character education programs.

### 3.3 Participants

A total of twelve informants participated in this study. The participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the planning and implementation of religious character education programs within the schools.

The informants consisted of:

- Three school principals
- Three vice principals responsible for curriculum or student affairs
- Three Islamic religious education teachers
- Three teachers involved in religious character development programs

These participants were considered to possess relevant knowledge and experience regarding the implementation of religious character education activities in their respective schools.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted between March and June 2024 using three primary qualitative techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

#### 3.4.1. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected informants to explore their perspectives on the implementation of religious character education programs. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview questions focused on several key aspects, including program design, implementation strategies, challenges encountered during implementation, and perceived changes in students' religious behavior.

#### 3.4.2. Participant Observation

Participant observation was carried out to examine the actual practices of religious character education within the school environment. The observations focused on various religious activities conducted at the schools, such as collective prayers, Qur'anic recitation sessions, religious mentoring, and other routine religious programs (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). This method enabled the researcher to capture the dynamics of teacher–student interactions and the practical implementation of religious activities within the school context.

#### 3.4.3. Document Analysis

In addition to interviews and observations, relevant school documents were analyzed to support the empirical data. These documents included school vision and mission statements, annual school programs, schedules of religious activities, and school regulations related to character education. Document analysis helped identify the alignment between formal institutional policies and the actual implementation of religious character education programs.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in several stages following the principles of realist evaluation.

First, all interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed through thematic coding. The coding process involved identifying key themes related to the three analytical components of realist evaluation:

context, mechanism, and outcome.

Second, the study identified Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) configurations for each case. Context refers to structural and institutional conditions influencing program implementation, such as leadership support, infrastructure availability, and school culture. Mechanism refers to the social processes that encourage or motivate behavioral change among participants, such as teacher role modeling, ritual habituation, and collective participation. Outcome refers to observable changes in students' religious attitudes and behaviors.

Third, a cross-case comparison was conducted to examine similarities and differences across the three schools. This comparative analysis helped identify patterns in the implementation of religious character education and explain how different contextual conditions activate particular mechanisms that lead to specific outcomes.

### 3.6 Validity and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

First, data triangulation was applied by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Second, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of the findings (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Third, cross-case comparison was used to minimize contextual bias by analyzing patterns across multiple research sites. Finally, an audit trail was maintained to document the entire research process, including data collection procedures and analytical decisions.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and voluntarily agreed to participate. Informed consent was obtained prior to conducting interviews, and participants' identities were anonymized to maintain confidentiality. The data collected were used solely for academic research purposes.

### 3.8 Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in a post-positivist paradigm, which acknowledges that social reality is complex and influenced by the interaction between structural conditions and human agency. Within this perspective, the researcher serves as the primary instrument in interpreting empirical data while maintaining methodological rigor through

systematic data collection and analysis.

## 4. RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that the implementation of religious character education across the three schools demonstrates different patterns shaped by variations in institutional context. Using the realist evaluation framework, the analysis identifies three configurations of Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) that explain how religious character education programs operate in different school environments.

The results are presented through three case studies representing distinct implementation models: institutional integration, ritual habituation, and managerial adaptation.

### 4.1 Institutional Integration Model (SMAN 2 Banjarbaru)

#### 4.1.1. Context

SMAN 2 Banjarbaru demonstrates a strong institutional environment that supports the implementation of religious character education. The school possesses adequate religious infrastructure, including a well-equipped prayer facility and sufficient copies of the Qur'an available for students. Religious activities are systematically integrated into the school routine, reflecting the institutional commitment to character development.

One of the main programs is the collective recitation of the Qur'an conducted every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday morning for approximately fifteen minutes before the first class begins. The activity is coordinated centrally and followed simultaneously by students in their respective classrooms.

A religious education teacher explained:

"The Qur'anic recitation program has become a daily habit for students. They already prepare themselves before the activity begins." (Teacher, SMAN 2 Banjarbaru)

In addition, the school organizes a weekly program known as Jumat Iman, which includes congregational Dhuha prayer and religious lectures. These activities are integrated with other school initiatives such as Jumat Sehat and Jumat Bersih, which are implemented alternately among different grade levels.

The school management actively supports these programs. The school consists of 62 civil servant teachers, 26 honorary teachers, and approximately 950 students, all of whom participate in the implementation of religious character activities. The school also provides inclusive arrangements for non-

Muslim students to participate in religious activities according to their respective beliefs.

#### 4.1.2. Mechanism

Within this context, several mechanisms were activated:

1. Policy coherence, where religious programs align with the school's institutional vision and educational policies.
2. Collective participation, involving teachers, students, and school staff in religious activities.
3. Systematic habituation, where regular and structured religious routines reinforce students' engagement with religious values.

#### 4.1.3. Outcome

The interaction between these contextual conditions and mechanisms generated several observable outcomes:

- consistent student participation in religious rituals
- increased discipline in performing religious practices
- internalization of religious values among students.

These findings indicate that strong institutional integration plays a significant role in sustaining religious character education within the school environment.

### 4.2. Ritual Habituation Model (SMAN 4 Banjarmasin)

#### 4.2.1. Context

SMAN 4 Banjarmasin operates within a more limited infrastructural environment. The school has relatively modest religious facilities, and the available prayer space is not sufficient to accommodate all students simultaneously. In addition, the student population represents diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

Despite these limitations, the school has developed a strong culture of religious activities embedded in the daily school routine.

Observations during the field study indicated that students regularly participated in routine religious activities before the start of classes.

#### 4.2.2. Mechanism

In this context, the implementation of religious character education relies primarily on mechanisms of ritual habituation, including:

1. Repetition of religious rituals, where students repeatedly participate in religious practices as part of their daily routines.
2. Collective discipline, where students perform

religious activities together under teacher supervision.

3. Teacher role modeling, where teachers demonstrate religious commitment and encourage students to adopt similar practices.

A teacher stated:

"Even though the facilities are limited, students are accustomed to performing religious activities together, and eventually they do it on their own initiative." (Teacher, SMAN 4 Banjarmasin)

#### 4.2.3. Outcome

These mechanisms produced several outcomes:

- increased awareness among students regarding religious obligations
- the development of independent religious practices
- students performing religious rituals voluntarily without external pressure.

These results suggest that ritual habituation can function effectively as a mechanism for religious character education even in contexts with limited infrastructure.

### 4.3 Managerial Adaptation Model (SMAN 1 Bati-Bati)

#### 4.3.1. Context

SMAN 1 Bati-Bati faces limitations in religious infrastructure, particularly the availability of space for collective worship. The school's prayer room is relatively small, requiring students to perform religious activities in rotation.

These infrastructural constraints require the school to adopt flexible organizational strategies to maintain religious character education programs.

#### 4.3.2. Mechanism

Within this context, several mechanisms were identified:

1. Internal coordination, involving collaboration among teachers and school administrators in organizing religious activities.
2. Adaptive scheduling, where religious activities are arranged in rotation to accommodate limited space.
3. Persuasive approaches, where teachers encourage students to participate in religious activities through guidance rather than strict enforcement.

A school administrator noted:

"Because the prayer room is small, we organize the schedule so that students can participate in turns." (Vice Principal, SMAN 1 Bati-Bati)

#### 4.3.3. Outcome

Despite infrastructural limitations, the following outcomes were observed:

- continuity of religious character education programs
  - maintained student discipline in participating in religious activities
  - sustained implementation of religious programs.
- These findings demonstrate that adaptive management strategies can support the

implementation of religious character education even under constrained institutional conditions.

#### 4.4. Cross-Case Comparison of CMO Configurations

The comparative analysis across the three schools reveals that the implementation of religious character education is shaped by distinct configurations of context, mechanism, and outcome.

Table 1: Context–Mechanism–Outcome (CMO) Configurations Across Cases

School	Context	Mechanism	Outcome
SMAN 2 Banjarbaru	Strong infrastructure and institutional support	Policy coherence, collective participation, systematic habituation	Consistent ritual discipline and internalization of religious values
SMAN 4 Banjarmasin	Limited facilities but strong ritual culture	Ritual repetition, collective discipline, teacher role modeling	Independent religious practices among students
SMAN 1 Bati-Bati	Limited infrastructure with adaptive management	Internal coordination, adaptive scheduling, persuasive approaches	Sustained implementation of religious character programs

The comparison indicates that the effectiveness of religious character education is not determined solely by infrastructural capacity. Instead, the outcomes depend on how different contextual conditions activate specific mechanisms within each school environment.

To further illustrate the patterns identified in the cross-case comparison, the findings of this study can be conceptualized into three distinct models of religious character education implementation.

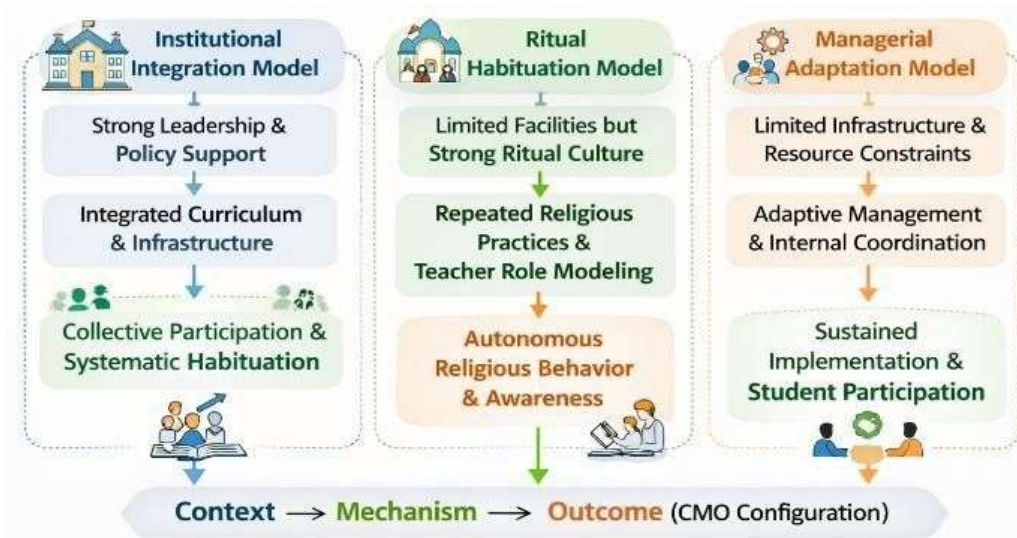


Figure 2: Patterns of Religious Character Education Implementation

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the implementation of religious character education in public schools is strongly influenced by the interaction between institutional context and the mechanisms activated within each educational environment (Das et al., 2022). By applying the realist evaluation framework, the study reveals that similar educational goals may be achieved through different mechanisms depending on the contextual conditions of each school. The analysis across the three cases shows that religious character education does not

operate as a uniform program but rather as a context-dependent process shaped by leadership, infrastructure, school culture, and managerial practices.

The first pattern identified in this study is the institutional integration model, observed in SMAN 2 Banjarbaru. In this context, the presence of strong leadership, supportive policies, and adequate infrastructure creates an institutional environment that allows religious character education to be systematically integrated into the daily school routine (Suparto et al., 2025). This finding supports previous

research suggesting that the effectiveness of character education is strengthened when moral values are embedded within institutional structures and school culture (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). When religious activities are formally integrated into school policies and routines, they become normalized practices that encourage students to internalize religious values as part of their daily behavior.

The findings also highlight the importance of collective participation in sustaining religious character education programs (Sofiana, 2025). Teachers, school leaders, and students collectively contribute to the implementation of religious activities, creating a shared moral environment within the school. This aligns with the concept of the moral community in schools, where ethical values are reinforced through collective engagement and consistent institutional support. Within such environments, students are more likely to perceive religious practices not merely as formal obligations but as meaningful social practices that shape their personal and moral identities.

The second pattern identified in this study is the ritual habituation model, observed in SMAN 4 Banjarmasin. Unlike the institutional integration model, this pattern emerges in a context where infrastructural resources are relatively limited. However, the school compensates for these limitations through consistent repetition of religious activities and strong teacher role modeling (Schnauffer et al., 2023). The findings suggest that repeated exposure to religious rituals can gradually shape students' behavioral habits and encourage voluntary participation in religious practices.

This mechanism of habituation supports the argument that character development often occurs through repeated social practices that become internalized over time. Ritual repetition functions as a behavioral reinforcement mechanism that familiarizes students with religious values and practices (Nurhidayah, 2025). Over time, these practices may evolve from externally guided routines into internally motivated behaviors (Rizal et al., 2024). The results therefore suggest that infrastructural limitations do not necessarily prevent the successful implementation of religious character education when strong cultural practices and teacher engagement are present.

The third pattern observed in this study is the managerial adaptation model, identified in SMAN 1 Bati-Bati. In this case, limited physical infrastructure requires the school to adopt flexible management strategies to sustain religious character education activities. The use of rotational schedules, internal

coordination among teachers, and persuasive approaches toward students allows the school to maintain religious programs despite spatial and resource constraints.

These findings highlight the role of adaptive management in educational settings. Schools often operate under diverse resource conditions, and effective program implementation may depend on the ability of school leaders and teachers to adjust organizational practices to local circumstances (Nismawati, 2025). In this context, managerial flexibility becomes a key mechanism that enables schools to sustain character education programs even when ideal infrastructural conditions are not available.

The cross-case comparison further demonstrates that the success of religious character education programs cannot be explained solely by the availability of resources or the presence of formal policies. Instead, the effectiveness of such programs depends on how contextual conditions activate particular mechanisms that shape students' engagement with religious values. This insight reinforces the central premise of realist evaluation that educational interventions produce outcomes through the interaction between context and mechanism.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on character education by demonstrating that religious character development in schools is not determined by a single implementation model. Instead, different contextual conditions may generate different pathways through which religious values are internalized by students (Mukhibat et al., 2024). By identifying three distinct implementation patterns—institutional integration, ritual habituation, and managerial adaptation—this study offers a contextualized framework for understanding how religious character education operates within public school environments.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the findings also have practical implications for educational policy and school management. First, schools with strong institutional capacity should integrate religious character education into formal school policies and daily routines to ensure program sustainability (Handayani, 2025). Second, schools with limited infrastructure may still effectively implement character education through consistent ritual practices and teacher role modeling (Mof et al., 2026). Third, adaptive management strategies can enable schools to sustain religious programs even when infrastructural constraints exist.

Overall, the findings suggest that the effectiveness

of religious character education depends not only on program design but also on the ability of educational institutions to align contextual conditions with mechanisms that encourage students' moral and religious development.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of religious character education in public schools is shaped by the interaction between institutional context and the mechanisms activated within each educational environment. Using the realist evaluation framework, the findings identify three distinct patterns of implementation: institutional integration, ritual habituation, and managerial adaptation. Each pattern reflects how different contextual conditions activate specific mechanisms that influence the internalization of religious values among students. Schools with strong institutional support tend to integrate religious programs systematically into daily routines, while schools with limited infrastructure rely on repeated ritual practices or adaptive management strategies to sustain religious character education activities.

These findings highlight that the effectiveness of religious character education is not determined solely by the availability of resources or formal policies, but

by how schools activate appropriate mechanisms within their contextual conditions. The study contributes to the literature on character education by providing a contextualized evaluation model that explains how religious character education operates across diverse school environments. The results also suggest that policymakers and educational practitioners should consider contextual flexibility when designing character education programs, allowing schools to adapt implementation strategies according to their institutional capacities while maintaining the core objective of strengthening students' moral and religious development.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## 8. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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