

Youth Religious Study Groups and Moral Development: A Community-Based Case Study in West Java

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse the role of youth religious study groups in shaping the moral character of the younger generation at the At-Taqwa Mosque in Kampung Sayang, Sumedang Regency. The study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from the informants' perspectives. Data collection techniques included interviews, observation and documentation. The findings are expected to demonstrate that youth religious study groups play a strategic role in the internalisation of moral values through habit formation, role modelling, and religious social interaction. Furthermore, the success of moral development is influenced by supporting factors such as the religious environment and the role of mentors, as well as inhibiting factors such as the influence of digital culture and low youth participation. This study concludes that youth religious study groups are an effective means of shaping the character of the younger generation if managed in a structured and contextually appropriate manner.

Keywords: Youth Religious Study Groups, Moral Development, Islamic Education, Non-formal Education, Character Building

INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia comprises formal, non-formal and informal pathways that complement one another in achieving national educational objectives. Non-formal education plays a strategic role in fostering religious values and shaping moral character within society. From an Islamic educational perspective, moral character is the primary objective, formed through a continuous process of internalising values via habituation and role modelling.

Research shows that character development through the instilling of religious values and setting a good example is capable of consistently shaping pupils' behaviour (Amin, 2022). Furthermore, the structured instilling of Islamic values plays a role in shaping religious character (Annisa, 2024). Islamic culture, built through regular religious practices, also contributes to the development of akhlak al-karimah (Nurmawati, Herni & Jamilah, 2025). Strategies for character development based on habit formation and setting a good example are considered more effective than theoretical approaches (Maratussholihah & Wibowo, 2022).

However, in today's digital age, the development of adolescents' moral character faces serious challenges due to the influence of social media, which can undermine social ethics and discipline (Karlina, Putri, Azizah, Karima & Gusmaneli 2024). This situation calls for the involvement of non-formal educational institutions capable of acting as a counterbalance in the moral development of adolescents.

In this context, youth religious study groups, as part of non-formal Islamic education, play a complex role in shaping the moral character of the younger generation. These study groups serve not only as an educational tool for conveying Islamic moral values, but also as a means of internalising those values through continuous practice and reflection (Misbah & Jamal, 2023). Furthermore, youth religious study groups serve as spaces for exemplary behaviour, where religious teachers and mentors act as real-life role models for young people in behaving in accordance with Islamic teachings (Fudholi, Kertayasa & Haerudin, 2025).

Furthermore, religious study groups for teenagers also serve as a means of instilling religious practices, such as praying in congregation, discipline and social etiquette, which form the basis for character building (Durrotunnisa & Nur, 2020) . Religious study groups also play a social role as a space for interaction that fosters a healthy and religious social environment, as well as serving as a form of social control against negative environmental influences (Tanjung & Muin 2025) .

In the digital age, religious study groups for teenagers also serve as a form of moral guidance, helping young people to filter information and regulate their behaviour amidst the ever-evolving tide of technology (Yusnita, Prasetyo, Hasanah, Octaviona & Rahmatika 2023). As such, these study groups function not only as religious activities, but also as a comprehensive character-building programme.

Recent research findings indicate that mosques and religious guidance activities play a significant role in shaping the character and morals of the younger generation. Mahfud, Rintaningrum, Saifulloh, Wahyuddin, Muhibbin & Ratu (2024) found in their study that mosques function as centres for character education through religious guidance, exemplary behaviour and structured activities, thereby strengthening students' religious character. This study shares similarities with the aforementioned research as both view the mosque as a non-formal Islamic educational environment that plays a role in the character-building process.

Furthermore, the study , Rahmat, Hermawan & Surahman (2024) shows that mosque-based extracurricular activities for adolescents, which integrate habit formation, role modelling and religious intelligence, have been proven to enhance the moral character of pupils. This study is closely related to the research conducted, as both examine the role of mosque-based youth activities in character development through the process of instilling Islamic values. However, that study placed greater emphasis on extracurricular activities, whilst this study focuses on youth religious study groups as a form of non-formal Islamic education within the community.

Furthermore, Yusuf & Ulfah (2026) explains that mosque-based tarbiyah programmes serve as an effective means of shaping the moral character of the younger generation whilst addressing the challenges posed by technological developments in the digital age. This study reinforces research on the importance of the mosque's role as a space for the moral development of young people. Nevertheless, previous research has largely focused on the functions of mosques and development programmes in general; consequently, there has been little research specifically examining youth religious study groups at the local community level, taking into account aspects such as activity planning, the process of internalising values in moral development, and the supporting and hindering factors in their implementation.

However, the situation at the At-Taqwa Mosque indicates that not all adolescents experience uniform moral development, despite the regular religious study sessions. This suggests a gap between the implementation of these activities and the outcomes in terms of moral development.

Previous research has largely focused on religious study sessions in general; consequently, there remains a limited body of research focusing specifically on youth religious study sessions at the local level within the context of moral development in the digital age. Therefore, this study is important to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of youth religious study sessions in shaping the moral character of the younger generation.

This study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) how are youth religious study groups planned; (2) how does the process of moral development take place through youth religious study groups; and (3) what are the supporting and hindering factors in this process? The objective of this study is to describe and analyse the role of youth religious study groups in shaping the moral character of the younger generation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from the informants' perspective (Anabelle & Ramadhan, 2023). This approach was chosen because the study focuses on the process and meaning of the internalisation of moral values in youth religious study groups.

The research was conducted at the At-Taqwa Mosque in Kampung Sayang, Jatinangor Sub-district, Sumedang Regency. There were 10 informants in this study, comprising 1 religious teacher, 2 members of the mosque's youth committee, and 7 teenagers participating in the religious study sessions. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, taking into account their active involvement in the religious study sessions.

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, participatory observation and documentation. Interviews were used to explore the informants' experiences and perspectives; observation was carried out to directly observe the process of the religious study sessions; whilst documentation was used as supporting data in the form of activity archives and related records (Sugiyono, 2020).

Data analysis was carried out interactively through the stages of data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusions. In addition, analysis was also carried out through a coding process, which included: *open coding* (identifying and labelling data), *axial coding* (grouping interrelated categories) and *selective coding* (determining the main themes of the research).

Data validity is ensured through triangulation and member *checking*. Triangulation is carried out by comparing data from various sources and methods, whilst member *checking* involves reconfirming the interview findings with informants to ensure the consistency of the data. These techniques have proven effective in enhancing credibility and reducing bias in qualitative research.

Furthermore, research ethics were taken very seriously. The researchers applied the principle of informed consent, which involves obtaining the informants' consent prior to data collection and explaining the aims and benefits of the research. The researchers also maintained the confidentiality of the informants' identities to protect the participants' privacy and safety. The application of ethical principles such as informed consent and the protection of confidentiality are key principles in qualitative research to safeguard the rights and dignity of participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the research findings indicate that the youth religious study sessions at the At-Taqwa Mosque have been managed quite effectively through structured and participatory planning. The involvement of young people in determining the content and activities has had a positive impact on their attendance rates and enthusiasm. This suggests that an approach tailored to the participants' needs is key to ensuring the sustainability of youth activities.

With regard to the process of character development, it was found that the approach employed is holistic in nature, combining the delivery of teaching materials, setting a good example, fostering good habits, and the practice of worship. This gradual and repetitive process contributes to the development of better behaviour in adolescents, such as improved politeness, discipline and awareness of religious practice. Thus, moral education is not merely theoretical but is also implemented in everyday life.

Meanwhile, the supporting and hindering factors indicate that the success of religious study groups is greatly influenced by the social environment and the internal circumstances of the young people. Support from peers, parents and a conducive mosque environment are key

drivers of participation. However, challenges such as the use of social media, time constraints and fluctuations in the young people's motivation remain obstacles that need to be overcome. Therefore, innovation in methods and the management of activities is required to ensure that religious study groups remain relevant and appealing to the younger generation in the modern era.

Table 1. Summary Table of Research Findings

No	Research Question	Key Findings	Implications
1.	Planning of youth religious study sessions	Planning is carried out in a structured manner through a regular weekly schedule and monthly programme, with timings adjusted to fit in with school activities. The material focuses on moral values and social interaction amongst young people and is tailored to the participants' needs. A variety of teaching methods are employed (lectures, discussions, practical exercises), and young people are involved in deciding on themes and activities.	Participatory and contextual planning enhances the adolescents' engagement and ensures the material is relevant to their lives. This leads to increased interest and sustained participation in the study sessions. Furthermore, the variety of methods helps to reduce boredom and enhances the effectiveness of moral education.
2.	The process of character development for the younger generation	Guidance is provided in stages through the delivery of teaching materials, discussions, setting a good example, fostering habits, and the practice of worship. The process is ongoing, with an emphasis on consistent behaviour. A religious environment and supporting activities such as memorisation and social activities reinforce the process of internalising moral values.	This holistic development process (cognitive, affective, psychomotor) contributes to the more comprehensive formation of adolescents' character. Setting a good example and the development of habits are key factors in translating moral values into tangible behaviour. A conducive environment also accelerates the internalisation of these values in daily life.
3.	Factors supporting and hindering religious education for adolescents	Supportive factors include peer support, a conducive mosque environment, varied teaching methods, and support from parents and the community. Barriers include inconsistent attendance,	The success of character development is greatly influenced by the synergy between internal and external factors. Social support strengthens participation, whilst barriers such as technology and time

		the influence of social media and mobile phones, time constraints, and differences in adolescents' levels of understanding.	constraints call for innovative learning strategies. Consequently, religious study groups need to adopt more engaging and flexible approaches to remain relevant to the circumstances of today's adolescents.
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Source: analysis of interview data, 2026

Discussion

The planning of youth religious study sessions at the At-Taqwa Mosque cannot be reduced to a mere administrative task involving the drawing up of timetables and the selection of materials; rather, it must be understood as a pedagogical construction process within the framework of non-formal education. The adjustment of session times to fit in with school activities demonstrates that planning functions as a mechanism for adapting to the structure of young people's lives. Theoretically, this is important because in non-formal education. The success of a programme depends heavily on the degree of compatibility between the design of the activities and the social circumstances of the participants (Setiawan, Supriadi & Mulyana 2024). Thus, flexibility in planning is not merely a practical strategy, but a form of recognition of the dynamics of young people's lives as an integral part of the educational process itself.

Furthermore, the focus of the material on ethics and adolescent social interactions indicates that the religious study sessions employ a contextual approach to moral education. From Al-Ghazali's perspective, moral values cannot be instilled effectively if they are presented in the form of normative abstractions divorced from individual life experiences. Therefore, the relevance of the material is key to ensuring that values are not only understood cognitively but also internalised as guidelines for behaviour. Conceptually, these findings indicate that religious study groups function as a mediating space between normative teachings and social reality, where religious values are translated into everyday practice.

The involvement of young people in the planning process indicates a paradigm shift from an instructive learning model towards a participatory one. Sukmawati (2023) emphasises that the active participation of learners in the learning process has implications for the development of a sense of ownership, which ultimately strengthens their commitment to the values being learnt. In this context, participation serves not only as a strategy to improve attendance, but also as a mechanism for the internalisation of values through direct involvement in the process of meaning-making. This demonstrates that religious study sessions not only transmit values, but also build moral awareness through collective experience.

Furthermore, the variety of methods used in planning such as discussions, religious practices and social activities demonstrates that the religious study group has adopted a differentiated approach to learning. Theoretically, this differentiation is important because participants have diverse backgrounds, experiences and levels of understanding. The variety of methods serves not only to prevent boredom, but also to ensure that the learning process can address various dimensions of learning experiences, including cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects.

On closer analysis, the programme planning structure which includes regular weekly and monthly study sessions indicates an institutionalised approach to the management of these sessions. However, what is more important from a theoretical perspective is how this structure remains open to flexibility and participation. This demonstrates that the study sessions operate as an adaptive system rather than as a static programme.

These findings indicate that youth activities serve not only as religious activities, but also as a community-based system of moral education. Within this framework, planning serves as an

epistemological foundation that determines how values are constructed, transmitted and internalised within the social context of adolescents. Thus, religious study groups can be understood as a model of non-formal education that integrates adaptability, contextuality and participation as its core principles.

The process of moral education in youth religious study groups demonstrates that character development is neither linear nor instantaneous, but rather takes place through a constructive process involving the interplay of knowledge, experience and social practice. The delivery of moral education content serves merely as an initial stage in building cognitive awareness, whilst behavioural change depends heavily on an ongoing process of internalisation.

The discussion- and sharing-based approach employed demonstrates that moral education is carried out through a reflective process. Adolescents do not merely accept values as external norms, but are encouraged to interpret them and relate them to their own life experiences. Theoretically, this is in line with the constructivist approach, which states that knowledge is constructed through a process of reflection on experience (Rahman, Munandar, Fitriani, Karlina & Yumriani, 2022). Thus, moral education is not merely indoctrinatory but transformative, as the values understood are the result of a construction of meaning relevant to the individual's life.

The role model provided by the mentor is a central element in this mentoring process. According to Albert Bandura's social learning theory, individuals shape their behaviour through observation of social models they consider significant. In the context of religious study groups, mentors serve as concrete representations of the values being taught. Theoretically, this demonstrates that moral education cannot rely solely on verbal instruction, but requires consistency between values and practice. When mentors are able to embody these values in their day-to-day behaviour, the process of internalisation becomes more effective, as young people are provided with real life examples to emulate.

Furthermore, the practice of repeated habituation demonstrates that the cultivation of moral character relies on the mechanism of habituation. In Al-Ghazali's view, moral character is formed through the repetition of actions until they become ingrained traits. This is reinforced by Hakim & Ristanto (2024), which states that habituation plays a crucial role in shaping self control and behavioural consistency. Thus, moral education is not merely oriented towards an understanding of values but towards the formation of stable behavioural patterns.

Supporting activities such as religious practice and memorisation demonstrate that moral education also involves a practical dimension. The integration of cognitive, affective and psychomotor aspects demonstrates that the learning process is holistic. This is important because character development cannot be achieved through a single dimension alone, but rather through a comprehensive learning experience.

Furthermore, the continuous process of reiterating and reinforcing values demonstrates that character development is a longitudinal process. This means that behavioural change is not expected to occur instantly, but rather through an ongoing process. This underscores the fact that religious study sessions serve as a space for long-term development, enabling a gradual transformation of values.

These findings indicate that youth religious study groups function as a community based moral education system that operates through the integration of reflection, role modelling and habituation. Theoretically, this broadens the understanding that moral development within a community context is not merely instructional in nature, but rather a social process that shapes behaviour through ongoing interaction.

Factors that support and hinder religious study among adolescents indicate that moral development is a process influenced by complex interactions between the individual and social life. Peer support is one of the key factors that reinforces adolescent participation. Theoretically, in social psychology, peer groups function as agents of socialisation that shape individual norms and behaviour (Putri, Martono, Puspitasari & Kurniawan 2024). This indicates that adolescents'

religious behaviour is not individual in nature, but rather collective, with social interaction being a determining factor in the formation of moral character.

The supportive environment of the mosque, together with the support of parents and the community, demonstrates that the religious study group operates within the framework of community-based education. From the perspective of the sociology of education, the social environment acts as an agent of socialisation that reinforces the internalisation of values through repeated interaction. Thus, the success of character development is determined not only by teaching methods, but also by the quality of the supportive environment.

However, the influence of technology and social media poses a structural challenge to moral education. Adolescents' fascination with the digital world highlights a clash of values between the religious environment and digital culture. According to Supriadi & Abdullah (2024), this situation calls for an adaptation in the approach to moral education to ensure it remains relevant to the lives of young people. Theoretically, this indicates that moral education in the modern era is not only concerned with the individual, but also with the wider cultural system.

Furthermore, time constraints due to school activities and differences in adolescents' levels of understanding indicate that character education faces the challenge of differentiation. A one-size-fits-all approach is no longer sufficient; therefore, more flexible and adaptive learning strategies are required. This underscores that the success of character education depends not only on the content of the material, but also on the ability to tailor the approach to the participants' circumstances.

These findings indicate that youth religious study groups constitute a dynamic, community-based system of moral education, the success of which is determined by the interplay between social, cultural and individual factors. Consequently, the cultivation of moral character cannot be understood as a purely individual process, but rather as the result of a social construction that takes place within the community ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that religious study groups for teenagers serve as a process of moral development that takes place systematically through planned activities, the cultivation of religious behaviour, and social interaction within the mosque environment. This process focuses not only on the delivery of religious material, but also on shaping the habits and attitudes of teenagers in their daily lives. The success of moral development in youth religious study groups is evident from the interconnection between activity planning, delivery methods, the role of the mentors, and a social environment that supports the internalisation of values.

Theoretically, the findings of this study reinforce Thomas Lickona's theory, which states that character formation occurs through the stages of knowing, feeling and acting upon values. In the context of religious study groups for adolescents, these stages are evident in the process of understanding religious material, internalising values through interaction and habit formation, and putting them into practice in everyday behaviour. Furthermore, this study is also consistent with the thinking of Al-Ghazali, who emphasised that moral character is formed through continuous habit-forming and the setting of a good example. The role of religious teachers and mentors as role models is a key factor in shaping adolescent behaviour. This study also supports Albert Bandura's theory, which explains that individual behaviour is influenced by the social environment through the processes of observation and imitation, whereby adolescents tend to imitate the behaviour they observe within the religious study group setting.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in reinforcing the concept of mosque-based non-formal Islamic education as a space for moral development that functions not only as a place of learning but also as a social environment that shapes character. This study demonstrates that

moral development will be more effective if carried out through the integration of knowledge, habit formation and exemplary behaviour within a single, continuous process. Thus, religious study groups for young people can be understood as an educational model capable of addressing the need for moral development amidst social change and the development of the digital age.

In practical terms, the findings of this study have implications for teachers, religious instructors and mosque administrators, encouraging them to pay greater attention to the planning and implementation of religious study sessions for teenagers. These sessions need to be designed to be more engaging, interactive and tailored to the characteristics of teenagers in order to increase their participation. Furthermore, mentors need to optimise their role as role models, as their attitudes and behaviour significantly influence the process of shaping teenagers' moral character. The environment in which these religious study sessions take place also needs to be managed to ensure it is a comfortable, religious space that fosters positive social interaction.

This study also recommends that religious study groups for teenagers be developed using an approach that is more contextual and adaptable to the changing times. The use of digital media could be one way of increasing teenagers' interest in attending religious study sessions. Furthermore, regular evaluations of these sessions are needed to assess their effectiveness in fostering moral development among teenagers. Support from families and the wider community also needs to be strengthened so that the values instilled during these sessions can be consistently applied in everyday life.

Thus, religious study groups for teenagers are not merely routine religious activities, but can serve as a strategic means of shaping the moral character of the younger generation if managed in a focused, sustainable manner and in line with the needs of today's teenagers.

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