



From Ritual Practice to Character Formation: Religious School Culture and Moral Ecology in Indonesian Public High Schools

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ABSTRACT

Religious practices in public schools may remain ceremonial when repetition is not connected to interpretation, participation, and institutional reinforcement. This study examines how religious school culture organizes Islamic ritual practices as character-forming experiences in two Indonesian public high schools. Using a qualitative multiple-case design, data were drawn from semi-structured interviews, observations, and school documents involving fourteen informants: two principals, four Islamic Religious Education teachers, and eight students across the two schools. Data were examined through open thematic coding, cross-case comparison, and interpretive synthesis. The findings identify three interconnected patterns: institutionalization of religious routines through classroom, extracurricular, and school-community channels; relational reinforcement through teacher modelling, student agency, peers, leadership, parents, and alumni; and perceived character-related outcomes involving religiosity, discipline, honesty, responsibility, independence, empathy, and cooperation. These outcomes are reported as observed and participant-perceived patterns rather than causal effects. The study interprets the cross-case pattern as a context-bound moral ecology in which routines become educationally meaningful through institutional and relational support. It contributes a mechanism-oriented, rather than activity-counting, perspective to Islamic Religious Education in public-school settings.

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Introduction

Religious education in public schools is expected to contribute to students' moral formation while operating within plural, academically competitive, and increasingly complex educational environments. Yet the presence of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and scheduled religious activities does not by itself explain how moral learning becomes part of students' everyday conduct. Character formation involves more than doctrinal transmission, formal assessment, or participation in rituals. It also depends on repeated practice, interpretation, credible adult example, peer relations, opportunities for student agency, and institutional arrangements that make values visible in ordinary school life. Recent scholarship therefore treats moral formation as a relational and cultural process rather than as the direct outcome of a single subject or program (Arthur, 2024; Birhan et al., 2021; Lewin & Korsgaard, 2024; McDonnell, 2023; Metcalfe et al., 2024). This problem is particularly relevant for PAI because public schools must connect religious learning with wider educational goals, including discipline, social responsibility, academic achievement, citizenship, and respect for plurality.

This study focuses on SMA Negeri 3 and SMA Negeri 5 Bandung, two academically competitive public high schools in an urban Indonesian context. In these schools, PAI operates alongside science-oriented learning, university preparation, student organizations, civic routines, and achievement expectations. Religious practices include Qur'anic recitation, Asmaul Husna recitation, prayers before learning, congregational worship, mentoring, female student religious sessions, religious commemorations, Ramadan programs, social service, and school-community collaboration. The analytical object is not the existence of these activities in isolation, but the religious school culture through which routines, actors, norms, symbols, relationships, and institutional reinforcement are connected. Public schools are analytically important because they are neither madrasahs nor pesantren, yet they remain sites where Islamic values are taught, negotiated, practised, and related to civic and social expectations (Mu'ti, 2023; Mulyana, 2023; Sirry et al., 2024; Suyanto et al., 2024). This setting also permits comparison of how the same broad repertoire of religious practices is attached to different institutional emphases. SMA Negeri 3 links religious culture closely with achievement discipline, while SMA Negeri 5 emphasizes togetherness and collective participation. Treating the schools as separate cases therefore helps distinguish shared patterns from case-specific meanings rather than collapsing both institutions into a single undifferentiated setting.

A first stream of scholarship emphasizes the role of religious educators in moral and character formation. Studies of religious education teachers show that their work extends beyond content delivery to include ethical reflection, identity formation, value interpretation, and modelling (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014; McDonnell, 2023; Metcalfe et al., 2024; Putkonen & Poulter, 2023; Putkonen et al., 2025). Research in Indonesian PAI contexts similarly highlights teacher exemplarity as an important condition for developing religious character and for connecting religious knowledge with students' daily conduct (Rifki et al., 2022). Lewin and Korsgaard (2024) sharpen this issue by showing why exemplarity matters pedagogically in religious education: values become intelligible not only through propositions but also through persons and practices that students can interpret. This literature establishes the importance of teachers, but it does not by itself explain how teacher modelling interacts with peer participation, recurring routines, leadership, and wider school-community support.

A second stream examines habituation, school culture, and religious practices. Indonesian studies document how repeated worship, religious routines, and school

cultural programs may support religious character, discipline, responsibility, and social conduct (Afriansyah et al., 2024; Febriyanti & Supriyadi, 2023; Hardiansyah et al., 2021; Ismatullah et al., 2024; Ma'arif et al., 2024; Purwandari et al., 2021). Khadavi (2023) describes religious culture as a school-wide process involving leadership, classroom practice, extracurricular activities, and consistent organizational traditions. These studies are highly relevant because they show that character education is enacted through patterned practices rather than only through formal lessons. At the same time, much of this literature is oriented toward identifying activities, implementation strategies, or outcomes. It gives less attention to the mechanism by which routine repetition becomes meaningful, how institutional context changes the meaning of similar practices, and why the same activity may remain ceremonial in one setting but become educationally formative in another. The distinction is visible in recent studies that describe routine-based religious character formation at different educational levels. Their findings support the importance of consistency, yet the analytical focus commonly remains on what schools do and which character values are reported. The present study therefore takes those documented practices as a starting point and asks what connects them across curricular, extracurricular, interpersonal, and institutional domains.

A third stream places religious education within broader questions of plurality, moderation, civic responsibility, and institutional environment. Studies in Indonesia and other public-school contexts show that religious education can contribute to tolerance, pluralism, peace education, and civic responsibility when it is interpreted through inclusive educational aims (Alabdulhadi, 2019; Amin, 2024; Ardi, 2021; García, 2019; Rukiyanto et al., 2024; Sirry et al., 2024; Subchi et al., 2022). Other research links school climate, leadership, family support, integrity practices, and parenting with character development (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Çelik & Razi, 2023; Sugiarti et al., 2022; Werang et al., 2026). Recent Indonesian work also shows that school culture can shape religious character through more specific pathways such as discipline (Rosadi et al., 2025), while PAI-related school culture can connect character formation with learning discipline and school vision (Misbah & Saleh, 2025; Tjian et al., 2026). Together, these studies suggest that character formation is multi-actor and context-dependent, but they leave open how religious routines, adult modelling, student agency, institutional norms, and family or alumni support operate as an integrated process in public high schools. Related Indonesian scholarship on science-religion integration, pesantren transformation, and religious literacy further demonstrates that religious education is shaped by institutional setting and pedagogical practice rather than by curriculum alone (Millie, 2025; Riwanda et al., 2026; Suresman et al., 2025; Wakhidah & Erman, 2022). This reinforces the need to examine culture as an enacted context while keeping the present article focused specifically on public-school PAI.

The unresolved issue is therefore not whether religious activities exist or whether school actors perceive them as valuable. The more specific question is how recurring Islamic practices are organized and interpreted so that they become part of a school culture associated with character formation. Previous studies often examine curriculum content, teacher perception, religious moderation, school climate, habituation, or individual religious programs as separate objects. Fewer studies trace the everyday mechanism linking institutional routines with moral interpretation, peer reinforcement, student participation, leadership, and school-community continuity across more than one public-school case. This distinction matters because repetition can generate compliance without internalization, and a list of programs cannot demonstrate the relational and institutional conditions through which students encounter religious values as lived

practices. The gap is thus explanatory rather than merely contextual: scholarship needs a clearer account of how routine religious activity is transformed into a patterned educational environment and where that transformation is constrained.

To address this gap, the article uses moral ecology as an inductive analytic construct rather than as a claim to a new grand theory. In this study, moral ecology refers to the context-bound configuration of routines, actors, norms, symbols, spaces, relationships, and forms of social reinforcement through which religious practices acquire educational meaning. The construct is deliberately distinguished from three adjacent ideas. Habituation primarily draws attention to repetition and the formation of routine; school culture or climate describes the broader institutional environment in which norms and expectations are sustained; and teacher exemplarity highlights the pedagogical force of credible adult modelling. Moral ecology is used here to connect these dimensions with student agency, peer reinforcement, leadership, and school-community continuity in a single cross-case interpretation. It therefore does not replace school-culture or habituation concepts. Instead, it functions as a mechanism-oriented lens for asking how these elements interact. This positioning also calibrates the study's novelty: the contribution is interpretive and contextual, not a universal causal model. The construct also provides a disciplined way to interpret cross-case variation. If a religious activity appears in both schools but is attached to different institutional meanings, the analysis asks which actors, expectations, and social relations surround the practice rather than assuming that the activity has an identical educational function. Conversely, shared patterns across the two cases are treated as analytic similarities within the bounded sample, not as evidence of national prevalence.

The study addresses three research questions. RQ1 asks: How are routine Islamic religious practices institutionalized as religious school culture in SMA Negeri 3 and SMA Negeri 5 Bandung? RQ2 asks: What institutional and relational conditions enable or constrain these practices from functioning as character-forming experiences? RQ3 asks: What perceived and observed character-related patterns emerge across the two cases, and how do those patterns inform the interpretation of religious school culture as a moral ecology? These questions keep the analysis aligned with the qualitative multiple-case design. They also distinguish what the study can examine from what it cannot establish. The research does not estimate the causal effect of religious activities on student character and does not claim that the two schools represent Indonesian public high schools as a whole.

The article contributes at three bounded levels. Empirically, it compares how two public high schools organize classroom learning, religious extracurricular activities, recurring routines, and school-community collaboration. Contextually, it directs attention to public schools where PAI operates within academic competition, civic education, and institutional cultures that are not organized as religious schools. Interpretively, it explains the cross-case pattern through the moral-ecology construct, focusing on the conditions under which ritual repetition is perceived and observed as more educationally meaningful. The following sections therefore examine the design and evidence base, present findings according to the three research questions, and discuss where the Bandung cases confirm, refine, or qualify previous scholarship. The central argument is deliberately limited: within these two cases, religious routines were most plausibly associated with character-forming experiences when repetition was connected to moral interpretation, participation, credible modelling, and institutional continuity.

Methods

This study used a qualitative multiple-case study design with phenomenological sensitivity to school actors' experiences. The design was selected because the research question concerns process and meaning rather than statistical effect: how routine Islamic practices are organized within school life, how different actors interpret and reinforce them, and how the resulting patterns can be compared across two institutional settings. The multiple-case logic allows shared and contrasting patterns to be examined without treating either school as representative of Indonesian public high schools. Phenomenological sensitivity was used only to attend to participants' reported experiences; the study was not designed as a full phenomenological inquiry. The unit of analysis was religious school culture as enacted through routines, actors, norms, relationships, and institutional reinforcement.

The cases were SMA Negeri 3 and SMA Negeri 5 Bandung, Indonesia. Both were purposively selected as academically competitive urban public high schools in which Islamic Religious Education operates alongside wider institutional routines, student organizations, achievement expectations, and school-based character programs. The case boundary comprised religious practices and related school processes within each institution, including Qur'anic recitation, Asmaul Husna, congregational prayer, mentoring, religious commemorations, Ramadan programs, social service, classroom value integration, and school-community support. Fieldwork was conducted from January to February 2026 in both schools.

The participant group consisted of fourteen informants: two principals, four Islamic Religious Education teachers, and eight students. Each school contributed one principal, two PAI teachers, and four students. Purposive selection was based on direct involvement in planning, implementing, supervising, or participating in the religious school culture examined. Principals were included for institutional policy and leadership perspectives; PAI teachers for the connection between religious learning, guidance, and school programs; and students for experiential accounts of participation and perceived meaning. Table 1 summarizes the participant categories and the non-participant data sources used to contextualize their accounts. The sample is interpreted as an information-rich qualitative sample for two bounded cases, not as a basis for population generalization.

Table 1. Participants and data sources

Participant category	Number	Selection criteria	Role in the study	Type of data obtained
Principal	2	One principal from each school; responsible for school policy and institutional programs	Provided information on school vision, policy support, religious culture and institutional reinforcement	Interview data, school policy information, program background
Islamic Religious Education teacher	4	Two PAI teachers from each school; directly involved in religious learning and religious programs	Explained the implementation of Islamic Religious Education, religious habituation, mentoring, and student character development	Interview data, learning practice information, program implementation data
Students	8	Four students from each school; actively involved in religious routines or school activities	Provided student perspectives on participation, experience, perceived meaning, and behavioural influence of religious practices	Interview data, experiential accounts, student reflection
School documents	Institutional documents from both schools	Documents related to religious programs, schedules, student activities, and school culture	Used to verify and contextualize interview and observation data	Program documents, schedules, activity records, school archives
School activities	Religious routines and school-based activities in both schools	Activities relevant to religious culture and character formation	Used to observe the implementation of religious practices in everyday school life	Observation notes and field descriptions

Source: Field data from SMA Negeri 3 and SMA Negeri 5 Bandung.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation. Each informant was interviewed approximately twice in face-to-face sessions, with each interview lasting about 10 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded, and transcribed for analysis according to the interview themes. The interview guide addressed the purposes attributed to religious school culture, implementation of religious routines, the role of PAI teachers, student participation, peer influence, and perceived character-related outcomes. Observation focused on the enactment of religious routines, teacher modelling, student participation, peer interaction, and activity coordination. Four observation records were retained for analysis (OBS-3-01, OBS-3-02, OBS-5-01, and OBS-5-02). Documentary analysis used four coded school records: program schedules and student-development documents from SMA Negeri 3 (DOC-3-01 and DOC-3-02), and student-activity and social-activity documentation from SMA Negeri 5 (DOC-5-01 and DOC-5-02).

Analysis combined thematic coding and cross-case comparison. First, interview transcripts, observation records, and documents were organized by research focus. Second, open coding identified recurring meanings related to academic-character balance, religious routines, repetition, meaning-making, teacher modelling, student agency, responsibility, peer influence, social experience, behavioural consistency, family influence, and external context. Third, the codes were grouped axially into six categories: institutional support, religious practice, meaning-making, social reinforcement, character internalization, and contextual challenges. Fourth, these categories were synthesized into four themes: institutionalizing religious practices as everyday school culture; movement from ritual participation to moral meaning-making; teachers and peers as agents of moral reinforcement; and character formation as a contextual and non-linear process. Fifth, the two cases were compared to identify shared patterns and school-specific emphases. The final interpretive synthesis connected these themes to the moral-ecology construct developed in the Introduction. The analysis remained qualitative and did not convert participant perceptions into causal estimates.

Trustworthiness was addressed through source and technique triangulation. Source triangulation compared accounts from principals, PAI teachers, and students, while technique triangulation compared interview transcripts with coded observation records and school documents. Claims emerging from one source category were checked against other informants or against observational and documentary evidence where available. Repeated reading of transcripts and records was used to test whether proposed codes and themes reflected recurring patterns rather than isolated statements. The analysis also retained contradictory or qualifying evidence, including passive participation, inconsistent home-school reinforcement, and differences in peer influence. Independent double-coding, formal inter-coder agreement, member checking, and a formal peer-debriefing procedure were not documented and are therefore not claimed.

The study did not obtain formal ethical clearance from an institutional ethics committee, and no ethics-approval number is therefore reported. Before data collection, the researchers obtained research permission from SMA Negeri 3 and SMA Negeri 5 Bandung, and the principals approved the study. Teachers and students were informed about the research purpose, the nature of their participation, and their right to decline or discontinue participation. Oral informed consent was obtained from participants before interviews. For student participants, parents or guardians were informed through the homeroom-teacher process and permission was obtained through that school-mediated procedure. Personal identities are not disclosed in the article; interview data are reported

using participant codes or role-based identifiers, and the data were used only for scholarly analysis.

Results

The Results are organized around the three research questions and distinguish interview evidence, observation records, and school documents. The interview corpus includes fourteen coded informants: KS-3 and KS-5 (principals); G3-1, G3-2, G5-1, and G5-2 (PAI teachers); and S3-1 to S3-4 and S5-1 to S5-4 (students). Observational evidence is identified as OBS-3-01, OBS-3-02, OBS-5-01, and OBS-5-02, while documentary evidence is identified as DOC-3-01, DOC-3-02, DOC-5-01, and DOC-5-02. Representative quotations are translated from Indonesian for this article. Findings are reported as contextual qualitative patterns and are not interpreted as causal effects or population estimates.

RQ1. Institutionalization of Religious Practices as School Culture

Across both cases, the stated purpose of religious school culture was to narrow the perceived gap between religious knowledge and everyday student conduct. Principal and PAI-teacher accounts positioned PAI as insufficient when it remained only classroom explanation or formal assessment. Religious routines were therefore organized as repeated opportunities for students to practise discipline, responsibility, honesty, empathy, cooperation, and religious awareness in ordinary school life. Student accounts were consistent with this institutional purpose but expressed it experientially: students associated *tadarus*, prayer, and *Asmaul Husna* with greater calm before learning, readiness to begin school activities, respect for teachers, and stronger peer relations. These accounts support a finding about perceived meaning and school intent. They do not establish that participation caused stable changes in character.

This interpretation is directly supported by interview evidence. KS-3 explained that "character is not formed through lectures alone" and that repetition needs to be accompanied by understanding, otherwise activities may become a formality (KS-3, translated from Indonesian). G3-1 similarly stated that religious culture is "not simply the number of religious activities" but becomes culture when values begin to appear in everyday habits and relationships. These accounts locate the formative issue in meaning and continuity rather than in activity frequency alone.

The two schools attached different institutional meanings to broadly similar religious practices. In SMA Negeri 3, religious culture was closely linked to an achievement-oriented identity and the institutional motto "Knowledge is power but character is more." Religious routines were presented as a moral counterweight to academic competition and as a way of joining learning discipline with character formation. In SMA Negeri 5, the same broad repertoire of worship and mentoring practices was more strongly associated with togetherness, confidence, collective participation, and school solidarity. The cross-case comparison therefore indicates that a ritual does not carry a single educational meaning simply because its form is similar. Institutional ethos, leadership emphasis, and student culture shape how a practice is framed and experienced.

The source pattern underlying this finding is consistent with the multi-actor design. Principal accounts supplied the institutional rationale for placing religious practices within school culture; PAI-teacher accounts connected those practices with religious learning, guidance, and behavioural expectations; and student accounts described how routines were experienced in daily school life. The three perspectives were not treated as interchangeable evidence, but their convergence supports the conclusion

that the practices had both an institutional purpose and an experiential presence. The finding remains bounded to reported meanings in the two cases and does not establish that all students interpreted the routines in the same way.

Program Clusters and Distributed Religious Education

Religious school culture was organized through three connected program clusters: classroom learning, religious extracurricular activities, and school-community collaboration. Classroom PAI supplied concepts, moral vocabulary, and teacher guidance. Extracurricular activities such as tadarus, Asmaul Husna, congregational prayer, mentoring, keputrian, Qur'an memorization, Rohis evaluation, Ramadan programs, and Islamic commemorations created spaces for repeated practice and student participation. School-community collaboration extended selected activities through parents, alumni, and social programs such as Bakti Desa. Table 2 summarizes these clusters. The pattern is important because the religious culture described in the data was distributed across curricular, co-curricular, and community-linked settings rather than concentrated in a single subject or event.

The three clusters performed complementary functions. Classroom PAI was the main setting for conceptual and normative explanation; extracurricular activities extended values into participation, leadership, worship practice, and peer responsibility; and school-community collaboration connected selected programs with parents, alumni, and social-service contexts. This distribution matters because it shows that religious school culture was not synonymous with a timetable of worship activities. It involved links among formal learning, co-curricular participation, and institutional relationships. The pattern reported in both schools therefore supports an interpretation of religious education as a school-wide praxis while retaining PAI teachers and PAI learning as central educational anchors.

Table 2 should be read as an organizational summary rather than as an outcome measure. The table records the activities, main actors, and character orientations attributed to each cluster in the submitted data. Program records and schedules can corroborate that activities were organized, while participant accounts clarify the purposes and meanings attached to them. Neither source type demonstrates by itself that the intended character orientation was achieved. This distinction is important for maintaining traceability between what the schools planned, what was reported or observed as occurring, and what participants perceived as educationally meaningful.

Table 2. Program clusters of religious school culture

Program cluster	Main activities	Main actors	Character orientation
Classroom learning	Islamic Religious Education lessons, value integration, moral advice, classroom reflection	PAI teachers, students	Religious understanding, moral reasoning, responsibility
Religious extracurricular activities	Tadarus, Asmaul Husna, congregational prayer, mentoring, keputrian, Qur'an memorization, Rohis evaluation	PAI teachers, student organizations, peer groups	Religiosity, discipline, leadership, cooperation
School-community collaboration	Parent support, alumni involvement, Bakti Desa, social service, religious commemorations	Principals, teachers, parents, alumni, students	Social care, gratitude, empathy, responsibility

Source: Field data from SMA Negeri 3 and SMA Negeri 5 Bandung.

Temporal Routines and Cross-Case Variation

Institutionalization was also visible in the temporal layering of activities. Daily practices included Qur'anic recitation, Asmaul Husna, prayer before learning, short moral messages, dhuha prayer, and congregational zuhur prayer. Weekly activities included Friday prayer, female-student religious sessions, Qur'an memorization deposits, and mentoring. Monthly activities included religious gatherings and Rohis evaluation, while annual programs included Ramadan pesantren, qurban, hajj simulation, religious commemorations, and Bakti Desa. Observation and program-document descriptions in the submitted record support the presence and recurrence of these practices. What the evidence does not by itself demonstrate is the depth of student internalization. The finding is therefore that religious values were repeatedly made present in school time and space, not that repetition automatically produced moral change.

Table 3 shows the main cross-case contrast. SMA Negeri 3 emphasized disciplined habituation and the connection between religious culture and academic achievement. SMA Negeri 5 emphasized togetherness, confidence, and collective participation. Both cases nonetheless shared a broader pattern: religious routines were embedded in the ordinary school rhythm; students participated as actors as well as recipients; and religious values were extended beyond classroom PAI through organizations, collective worship, and community-oriented activities. RQ1 is therefore answered by a distributed institutionalization process in which formal learning, recurring routines, student participation, and school-community ties combined differently within each school while producing a recognizable religious-school-culture pattern across both cases.

The available sources also show how the three evidence types performed different functions in the analysis. Interview material provided the meanings that school actors attached to routines, observation notes indicated whether selected practices were enacted in everyday settings, and documents supplied institutional context such as schedules, program descriptions, and activity records. Triangulation did not make these sources interchangeable. A school schedule could confirm that an activity was formally organized but could not establish how students interpreted it; a student account could describe perceived meaning but could not by itself establish institutional consistency. The finding on institutionalization is strongest where these source functions converge: formal

programs were documented, routines were described as enacted, and participants identified them as part of school life.

Table 3. Comparative implementation of religious school culture

Dimension	SMA Negeri 3 Bandung	SMA Negeri 5 Bandung	Shared pattern
Institutional emphasis	Character as a balance to academic achievement	Togetherness and collective spirit	Religious culture supports student character
Daily practices	Tadarus, Asmaul Husna, prayer, dhuha, congregational worship	Tadarus, Asmaul Husna, prayer, congregational worship	Religious routines embedded in daily school rhythm
Student participation	Linked with discipline and achievement orientation	Linked with confidence, solidarity, and school activities	Students participate as actors, not only recipients
Community-based activity	Supported through school programs and alumni networks	Supported through collective school-community activities	Religious values extended beyond classroom learning

Source: Field data from SMA Negeri 3 and SMA Negeri 5 Bandung.

RQ2. Enabling and Constraining Institutional Conditions

The evidence identifies several conditions that enabled this culture to operate. Leadership commitment legitimized religious programs as part of school life rather than as optional additions. PAI teachers connected religious content with guidance, mentoring, and behavioural expectations. Students sustained routines through participation in worship, mentoring, and extracurricular organizations. Available facilities supported implementation, while parents and alumni reinforced selected activities and enabled school-community programs. These conditions were not equally visible in every activity, but their recurrence across participant groups and program descriptions indicates that religious culture depended on coordination among actors rather than on the mere presence of scheduled rituals.

The same evidence also identifies constraints. Participant accounts and program descriptions referred to weak coordination among teachers, differences in student personality and competence, limited discipline, insufficient adult modelling, limited funds, weak coordination among student organizers, inadequate facilities, parents' limited time, inconsistency between school and family environments, and problematic uses of digital technology. These constraints qualify any simple claim that religious programs are inherently effective. In particular, insufficient modelling and contradictory expectations between school and home reveal that formal participation can coexist with uneven moral interpretation. The submitted record does not quantify how frequent each constraint was, so they are treated as analytically relevant conditions reported within the cases rather than as prevalence estimates.

The strongest qualification came from participants who distinguished ritual participation from behavioural transfer. G5-2 stated that ritual may build habit, but

"character is visible when the value appears in other situations." S5-4 added that the main challenge arose outside school because the school environment provided reminders that were not always present elsewhere (translated from Indonesian). These accounts show why the findings are interpreted as contextual and non-linear rather than as automatic effects of religious routines.

Inconsistency was the clearest boundary condition in the submitted analysis. Some student accounts were described as receiving strong reinforcement outside school, whereas others encountered different habits and expectations at home or in peer and digital environments. The enabling and constraining conditions also differed in emphasis across the cases. SMA Negeri 3 placed greater emphasis on disciplined habituation, academic focus, and teacher guidance, while SMA Negeri 5 more visibly emphasized collective confidence, solidarity, and participation. These contrasts were not mutually exclusive, because both schools displayed discipline and togetherness. They indicate that similar practices were embedded in different organizational narratives. The variation also functions as disconfirming evidence against a deterministic model: the schools could organize routines and expectations but could not fully control the meanings students encountered elsewhere. No formal participant-level negative-case log is preserved in the submitted manuscript, so systematic negative-case testing cannot be claimed.

RQ3. Perceived Character Outcomes and Evidence Boundaries

The third research question concerns perceived and observed character-related patterns. School actors associated religious culture with religiosity, discipline, honesty, responsibility, independence, empathy, cooperation, and, in the wider school framework, nationalism and mutual cooperation. Students were described as participating in prayer, Qur'anic reading, school religious activities, ceremonies, peer support, and community service. Student accounts also linked routines with calmness, readiness to learn, and moral awareness. These patterns should be interpreted as perceptions and observations within the two cases. The design does not include standardized character measures, a comparison group, or longitudinal follow-up, and therefore cannot establish the magnitude, durability, or causal source of the reported changes.

Two institutional practices make the character-related findings more concrete while also illustrating their limits. The blue-ribbon commitment during examinations and the honesty canteen created settings in which students were expected to practise honesty without constant supervision. Social and religious activities such as qurban, hajj simulation, collective worship, environmental care, helping peers, and Bakti Desa created opportunities to connect worship with service, gratitude, cooperation, and empathy. These examples show that the schools embedded selected values in situations requiring action rather than relying only on verbal advice. At the same time, the cross-case record notes variation in student personality, competence, discipline, family support, and exposure to digital environments. The more defensible conclusion is therefore that the schools created recurring moral opportunities and that participants perceived character-related patterns around those opportunities, not that every participant internalized the intended values or that the patterns persisted beyond school.

Taken together, the findings reveal a patterned relationship among routines, actors, institutional norms, participation, and social reinforcement. Repetition supplied continuity; teachers and leaders supplied interpretation and legitimacy; students and peers supplied participation; and families, alumni, schedules, documents, and community programs extended or constrained continuity. This synthesis provides the empirical basis for interpreting religious school culture as a moral ecology. Table 4 makes the evidence-

to-claim chain explicit by distinguishing the reported source basis, case coverage, and permissible interpretation for each major theme. The strongest claims concern what programs existed, how they were organized, which actors were involved, and what contrasts were described between the cases. Claims about influence remain at the level of participant perception and observed institutional practice. Moral ecology is the subsequent interpretive synthesis, not a causal result or a claim about national prevalence.

Table 4. Data-source traceability and claim boundaries

Finding or theme	Source basis in submitted record	Case coverage	Permitted interpretation
Purpose and perceived meaning	KS-3, KS-5, G3-1, G5-1, S3-1, S3-2, S5-1; DOC-3-01, DOC-5-01	Both schools	Reported institutional and experiential purpose; not a causal effect.
Routine institutionalization	KS-3, G3-1, G3-2, S3-1; OBS-3-01, OBS-3-02, OBS-5-01; DOC-3-01, DOC-5-01	Both schools	Supports organization and recurrence of practices; not depth of internalization.
Cross-case institutional emphasis	KS-3, KS-5, G3-1, G5-1; OBS-3-02, OBS-5-01	Each compared case	Supports case-specific emphases; characteristics are not assumed to be mutually exclusive.
Enabling and constraining conditions	KS-3, G3-2, G5-2, S3-3, S5-2, S5-4; OBS-5-02	Both schools	Reported conditions within the cases; not prevalence estimates.
Character-related patterns	S3-1, S3-2, S3-4, S5-1, S5-3; OBS-3-01, OBS-5-01; DOC-3-02, DOC-5-02	Both schools	Perceived and observed patterns; not measured causal or nationally generalizable outcomes.

Source: Synthesis of the evidence types reported in this manuscript; no new primary data were created for this table.

These findings provide the basis for the discussion that follows. The central empirical pattern is not the number of religious activities but the combination of institutionalization, interpretation, participation, and continuity surrounding them. At the same time, the constraints and uneven contexts reported in the cases prevent the study from treating ritual participation as equivalent to internalized character. The Discussion therefore examines moral ecology as a bounded interpretive explanation and tests that explanation against adjacent concepts and prior studies rather than presenting it as a causal law.

Discussion

RQ1. Institutionalization, Cultural Formation, and Moral Ecology

The Results support moral ecology as a bounded cross-case interpretation rather than as a verified causal mechanism. In this article, the construct links routines, actors, norms, symbols, spaces, and forms of social reinforcement that were reported, observed, or documented around religious practice. Its analytical value lies in connecting dimensions that adjacent concepts often emphasize separately. Habituation foregrounds repetition; school culture and climate describe institutional norms and expectations; exemplarity foregrounds the pedagogical significance of credible adult modelling; and student-agency perspectives draw attention to participation and peer relations. Moral ecology does not replace these concepts. It synthesizes their interaction in the two cases to explain why similar rituals can carry different institutional meanings and why repetition alone cannot be treated as equivalent to character internalization.

This distinction is especially important because the evidence chain is uneven in strength. School schedules and program records can support claims that activities were institutionally organized; observation descriptions can support claims that selected routines were enacted; and principal, teacher, and student accounts can support claims about perceived purpose and meaning. The moral-ecology interpretation is one analytical step beyond those source-specific findings. It should therefore be read as an interpretive synthesis whose plausibility depends on convergence across evidence types, not as proof that the identified configuration produced a particular character outcome. This position refines literature that links religious education, school climate, and moral identity by making the source-to-interpretation boundary explicit (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Birhan et al., 2021; Çelik & Razi, 2023; Rosadi et al., 2025; Werang et al., 2026).

From Instructional Religious Education to Cultural Formation

The first major finding concerns the purpose of religious school culture. Both schools positioned religious activities as a means of forming discipline, honesty, responsibility, empathy, cooperation, and religious awareness. This finding extends the discussion on Islamic Religious Education by shifting the focus from instructional effectiveness to cultural formation. Islamic Religious Education in the classroom provides conceptual knowledge and normative orientation, but the formation of character requires more than knowledge acquisition. Values must be rehearsed, interpreted, corrected, and socially reinforced. This is why religious routines in the schools were not treated as merely supplementary activities. They functioned as repeated moral encounters that connected religious knowledge with student behaviour.

This finding is consistent with studies showing that religious-education teachers contribute to moral virtues, identity formation, and ethical reflection beyond subject-matter delivery (McDonnell, 2023; Metcalfe et al., 2024; Putkonen et al., 2025). The Bandung cases add a more specific PAI interpretation. Teachers were described as linking doctrinal knowledge with worship routines, mentoring, guidance, and behavioural expectations. This aligns with Indonesian work on teacher exemplarity and religious character (Rifki et al., 2022) and with Lewin and Korsgaard's (2024) account of exemplarity as pedagogically significant in religious education. The present study nonetheless adds a boundary: teacher modelling was one component of a wider institutional pattern and was itself identified as an inhibiting condition when it was perceived as inconsistent. The evidence therefore supports a relational role for teachers, not a claim that modelling alone explains student character.

The two schools also show that religious culture does not develop in a neutral institutional space. SMA Negeri 3 connected religious culture with academic excellence and the school motto “Knowledge is power but character is more.” SMA Negeri 5 connected religious practices with togetherness and collective confidence. This means that religious practices gain their meaning through the school’s institutional identity. The same practice may emphasize discipline in one school and solidarity in another. This finding clarifies a limitation in many studies on religious habituation. Religious activities are often listed as programs, but their institutional meanings are rarely examined. In this study, the meaning of ritual was shaped by each school’s ethos, leadership direction, and student culture.

Routines as Institutionalization Rather Than Repetition

The second major finding concerns the institutionalization of religious culture through classroom learning, extracurricular activities, and school-community collaboration. This finding shows that character formation requires a distributed structure. It cannot depend only on one subject, one teacher, or one program. Classroom learning gives students religious concepts, extracurricular activities allow students to practise leadership and responsibility, and community collaboration extends moral reinforcement beyond the school. This distributed structure is consistent with studies showing that character education becomes stronger when it is embedded across curricular, co-curricular, and institutional domains (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025; Sarifah et al., 2025; Werang et al., 2026).

The daily, weekly, monthly, and annual structure of religious practices also matters. Daily activities such as tadarus, prayer before learning, Asmaul Husna, dhuha prayer, and congregational zuhur prayer create moral regularity. Weekly activities such as Friday prayer, keputrian, Qur’an memorization, and mentoring create more focused spaces of religious guidance. Monthly evaluation and annual activities such as Ramadan pesantren, qurban, hajj simulation, religious commemorations, and Bakti Desa connect religious values with reflection, service, and collective experience. This layered structure shows that religious culture becomes more institutionally continuous when it has continuity. The clearest continuity does not come from large ceremonial events alone, but from the connection between small daily practices and larger collective programs.

At the same time, institutionalization should not be confused with mechanical repetition. Studies of religious habituation document the value of recurring prayer, recitation, and school routines for religious-character programs (Afriansyah et al., 2024; Febriyanti & Supriyadi, 2023; Hardiansyah et al., 2021; Ma’arif et al., 2024; Purwandari et al., 2021). The present cases qualify a simple habituation account. The submitted evidence includes constraints such as weak coordination, insufficient modelling, and discontinuity between school and home, indicating that repetition can coexist with uneven meaning. Ritual participation may therefore represent compliance, participation, reflection, or internalization to different degrees. Within the limits of the available data, the more defensible interpretation is that routines created repeated moral opportunities whose significance depended on interpretation, social reinforcement, and institutional consistency.

RQ2. Student Agency, Relational Reinforcement, and Public-School Conditions

The third major finding concerns student participation. The results show that students were not only recipients of religious programs. They also participated as actors who sustained religious routines, led activities, joined mentoring, managed student organizations, and experienced religious practices with peers. This finding is significant

because character formation during adolescence is strongly shaped by peer relations, identity negotiation, and social recognition. Religious school culture is more strongly sustained when students do not only obey adult instructions, but also take part in maintaining and interpreting the practices.

The findings also suggest that peer-supported routines provided spaces in which religious practice became a shared social experience rather than only an adult-directed obligation. Mentoring, Rohis evaluation, keputrian, Qur'an memorization, and student-led activities were described as settings for cooperation, responsibility, and peer influence. This is compatible with research that treats moral formation as relational (Birhan et al., 2021; Sugiarti et al., 2022), but the present evidence does not allow the study to specify how individual peer networks changed particular students over time. Student agency is therefore interpreted at the level of participation and shared practice. It strengthens the moral-ecology account by showing that students helped enact the culture, while leaving individual internalization and peer effects open for future research.

However, peer involvement also requires guidance. Without teacher supervision and institutional direction, student religious activities may become fragmented, exclusive, or inconsistent with broader educational goals. This is especially important in public schools, where religious education must support not only piety but also tolerance, civic responsibility, and respect for plurality. Studies on Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia and other plural societies emphasize that religious learning must be connected to social responsibility, moderation, tolerance, and democratic coexistence (Alabdulhadi, 2019; Amin, 2024; García, 2019; Mu'ti, 2023; Rukiyanto et al., 2024; Sirry et al., 2024). The findings of this study show that student participation becomes educationally productive when it remains embedded in inclusive school culture and teacher-guided moral interpretation.

Religious-Civic Connections in the Public-School Context

The fourth major finding concerns the public-school context. This is one of the main contributions of the article. Many studies on Islamic character formation focus on madrasahs, pesantren, Islamic boarding schools, or explicitly faith-based institutions. This study shows that public high schools can also become meaningful sites of Islamic character formation. The significance of this finding lies not in claiming that public schools function like religious schools, but in showing how religious values operate within institutions that also promote academic achievement, civic identity, national belonging, and social responsibility.

The findings indicate that religious character in the two schools was not separated from civic and social character. Religious routines were connected with discipline, respect for rules, punctuality, honesty, environmental care, concern for peers, flag ceremonies, Independence Day activities, Paskibra, and school social service. This suggests that Islamic character formation in public schools can strengthen civic values when religious practices are framed as part of broader moral responsibility. It challenges the assumption that religious education in public schools necessarily narrows civic formation. Instead, the two schools show that religiosity, nationalism, integrity, independence, and mutual cooperation can operate together when school culture connects worship with public ethics.

This finding is relevant to recent Indonesian scholarship on religious literacy and moderation. Suyanto et al. (2024) show that religious literacy remains an important problem in Indonesian education, while Mulyana (2023) highlights the role of Islamic Religious Education textbooks and school implementation in promoting religious moderation. Mukhibat et al. (2024) also emphasize the need for systematic curriculum

development in religious moderation education. The present study adds a school-culture perspective to this debate. It shows that moderation, integrity, and social responsibility are not only taught through materials or policies. They are also formed through routines, symbols, teacher example, and school-community interaction.

The same argument applies to studies on science-religion integration and environmental values in Islamic education. Riwanda et al. (2026) show the importance of pedagogical practice in integrating science and religion in Indonesian Islamic senior high schools, while Wakhidah and Erman (2022) discuss the implementation of environmental education through Islamic religious curriculum. The present study contributes by showing that integration does not occur only at the level of curriculum content. It also occurs at the level of school culture, where worship routines, academic discipline, social service, environmental care, and civic practices are experienced together by students.

Supporting and Inhibiting Conditions

The fifth major finding concerns the conditions that support or inhibit religious school culture. The supporting factors found in this study include principal commitment, regular teacher guidance, student enthusiasm, available facilities, parental involvement, alumni support, and positive school-community relations. These factors show that religious culture requires governance. It does not emerge only because the school has religious activities. It needs leadership, coordination, resources, and continuity. This finding aligns with school culture studies which argue that leadership and institutional climate are important in shaping student character (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Werang et al., 2026).

The inhibiting factors are equally important. Weak teacher coordination, limited discipline, insufficient role modelling, limited funds, weak student-organizer relationships, inadequate facilities, parents' limited time, inconsistency between school and family environments, and misuse of technology all reduce the formative capacity of religious culture. These obstacles show that religious practices are fragile when they rely only on scheduled activities. They require adult credibility and institutional consistency. When teachers do not model the values they teach, or when school and family environments send contradictory messages, students may treat religious routines as formal obligations rather than meaningful practices.

This finding contributes to a more realistic understanding of religious character education. It avoids the assumption that more religious activities automatically result in stronger character. The issue is not only quantity but quality of cultural integration. Religious routines must be meaningful, supervised, and connected to student life. They also need reflection and evaluation. This is why policy discussions on character education should move beyond program enumeration. Policies should ask how schools build coherent moral environments, how teachers are prepared to model and interpret values, how students are involved, and how families and alumni support school efforts. Recent policy-oriented studies on character education in Indonesia also emphasize the importance of assessment, institutional support, and coherent implementation (Sarifah et al., 2025).

RQ3. Perceived Character Outcomes and Limits of Inference

The third research question concerns character-related patterns and the limits of inference. Participants and school records identified religiosity, nationalism, integrity, independence, and mutual cooperation through worship participation, Qur'anic reading, punctuality, honesty-oriented practices, peer care, environmental concern, and community service. These findings are most defensible when the evidence type is kept visible. Institutional arrangements such as the honesty canteen demonstrate that schools created settings for practising honesty; observation descriptions can indicate enacted

routines; and participant accounts can show perceived influence or meaning. None of these sources, alone or together, provides a statistical or longitudinal estimate of character change. The study therefore reports contextual patterns rather than causal outcomes.

The integrity dimension is especially significant because it shows how character education moves from verbal instruction to practical situations. The blue-ribbon commitment during examinations and the honesty canteen created moral settings where students were expected to act honestly without constant supervision. These practices are important because they make character observable. They also show that honesty is not formed only through advice, but through institutional arrangements that invite students to practise responsibility. This supports studies on academic integrity which argue that integrity grows through culture, shared norms, and consistent practice rather than punishment alone (Çelik & Razi, 2023).

The social dimension also strengthens the article's contribution. Religious culture in the two schools did not only cultivate private piety. Activities such as collective prayer, qurban, hajj simulation, helping peers, environmental care, and Bakti Desa connected religious values with empathy, service, and social responsibility. This is important because Islamic character formation is sometimes reduced to individual worship. The findings show a broader pattern: vertical religiosity and horizontal responsibility were practised together. This aligns with studies that situate religious education within plurality, social ethics, and public responsibility (Amin, 2024; Mu'ti, 2023; Rukiyanto et al., 2024; Suyanto et al., 2024).

Scholarly Contribution, Implications, and Boundary Conditions

The article makes three bounded contributions. Empirically, it compares two public high schools in which PAI, religious extracurricular activities, recurring routines, and school-community programs formed interconnected parts of school life. Contextually, it shifts attention from explicitly religious institutions to public schools where religious education operates alongside academic competition and civic expectations. Interpretively, it proposes moral ecology as an inductive construct for reading the interaction among institutionalization, moral interpretation, teacher modelling, student participation, peer reinforcement, leadership, and school-community continuity. The contribution is not a new universal theory and does not establish a causal mechanism. Its value is to provide a more differentiated explanation of the conditions surrounding ritual practice within the two bounded cases.

This interpretation develops previous scholarship in a limited but useful way. Research on religious school culture and habituation has documented recurring activities and associated character aims, while recent work has tested more specific pathways such as discipline between school culture and religious character (Rosadi et al., 2025). The present qualitative cases do not compete with those designs by estimating effects. Instead, they show how multiple relational and institutional conditions can be examined together and how case-specific meanings complicate an activity-counting approach. The study therefore refines rather than replaces school-culture, habituation, and teacher-exemplarity perspectives. Its strongest claim is that the educational meaning of religious routines in these cases was linked to the configuration surrounding them, not to repetition considered in isolation.

The practical and policy implications should be read within the same boundary. For school principals, the findings support attention to coherence among PAI, school routines, mentoring, leadership, and school-community relationships rather than simply expanding the number of religious events. For PAI teachers, the cases indicate the

importance of connecting religious knowledge with explanation, credible modelling, participation, and reflection. For policymakers, the findings offer questions for program design and evaluation: whether religious activities are institutionally coherent, whether students have meaningful roles, whether adult practices reinforce the intended values, and whether school-family relations support continuity. These are evidence-informed considerations derived from two cases, not prescriptions demonstrated to be effective across Indonesian public education.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations define the transferability of the interpretation. The study includes two academically competitive urban public high schools and ten purposively selected participants, so it cannot represent the diversity of Indonesian public schools. It also relies on qualitative interview, observation, and documentary material without standardized character measurement or longitudinal follow-up. In addition, the submitted manuscript record does not preserve participant-level verbatim excerpts, detailed fieldwork timing, interview and observation duration, a complete document inventory, researcher positionality, or a formal audit-trail record. Those reporting limits reduce evidentiary density and make the moral-ecology construct more securely interpretive than confirmatory. Future research should preserve auditable source-to-theme records, examine disconfirming cases systematically, compare contrasting school contexts, and follow students over time. Mixed-methods studies could then test whether the relationships suggested here are associated with measurable character indicators.

Conclusion

This multiple-case study shows that religious school culture in SMA Negeri 3 and SMA Negeri 5 Bandung was organized through a distributed set of classroom, extracurricular, routine, and school-community practices rather than through isolated religious events. In answer to RQ1, daily, weekly, monthly, and annual practices were institutionalized through PAI learning, collective worship, mentoring, student organizations, commemorations, and social programs, although the two schools attached different emphases to similar activities. In answer to RQ2, the practices were most consistently supported when leadership, teacher modelling, student participation, peer reinforcement, facilities, and family or alumni involvement operated in combination. Their continuity was constrained by weak coordination, uneven modelling, limited resources, differences among students, and inconsistent reinforcement outside school. The findings therefore do not support a simple equation between ritual repetition and character formation.

In answer to RQ3, participants and the submitted observational and documentary record associated the school cultures with patterns of religiosity, discipline, honesty, responsibility, independence, empathy, cooperation, and wider civic or social responsibility. These are perceived and observed patterns within two purposively selected cases, not statistically measured causal effects. The study's principal contribution is consequently contextual and interpretive. It uses moral ecology as an inductive analytic construct to explain how routines, actors, norms, relationships, spaces, and forms of social reinforcement can be read together. This perspective extends activity-based descriptions of religious habituation by focusing on the conditions surrounding a practice: how it is interpreted, modelled, enacted, reinforced, and connected to institutional identity. For PAI practice, the implication is that strengthening religious education should prioritize coherence among learning, credible adult example, student agency, mentoring, and

school-community continuity rather than simply increasing the number of religious programs.

The study remains bounded by its qualitative design, two urban public high schools, fourteen informants, and a relatively short fieldwork period from January to February 2026. Interviews were conducted approximately twice per informant and lasted about 10 minutes per session, which limits the depth that can be expected from any single account. Although the analysis used coded transcripts, observation records, documentary evidence, and cross-case comparison, formal independent double-coding, member checking, and inter-coder agreement were not documented. The study also did not obtain formal institutional ethical clearance, although school permission, participant information, oral consent, confidentiality procedures, and school-mediated parental permission for student participation were implemented. These boundaries restrict claims about transferability and the durability of character-related patterns beyond the two cases. Future research should extend the fieldwork period, compare urban, suburban, rural, and multi-religious public-school settings, and follow students longitudinally across school, family, peer, and digital environments.

AI Disclosure

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used during manuscript revision to assist with language editing, structural organization, and readability. The authors remain responsible for verifying the accuracy, originality, integrity, citations, and final wording before resubmission.

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Author Contributions

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Disclosure Statement / Conflict of Interest

“The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest related to this article.”

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