

CHARACTER EDUCATION OF STUDENTS THROUGH THE MUTIARA DESA PROGRAM AND OSING CULTURAL IMMERSION

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Abstract

Character education has become a crucial component in addressing the challenges of globalization and digitalization, which may weaken the moral values of younger generations. The Mutiara Desa program represents an experiential learning innovation that integrates contextual education with the introduction of Osing local culture. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the Mutiara Desa program in shaping students' character and to examine its relevance to the principles of Islamic educational philosophy. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at SMPN 1 Banyuwangi. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with students, foster families, and accompanying teachers, as well as documentation, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students' engagement in social and cultural village activities significantly enhances empathy, social responsibility, independence, and appreciation of local culture. Furthermore, the program reflects key Islamic educational concepts such as *ta'dib* and *tazkiyatun nafs* through direct experiences that facilitate deep value internalization. This study contributes to the development of an integrative, contextual, and experience-based character education model relevant to formal education in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Character Education; Experiential Learning; Osing Culture; Mutiara Desa Program; Islamic Education.*

Abstrak

Pendidikan karakter menjadi aspek penting dalam menghadapi tantangan globalisasi dan digitalisasi yang berpotensi melemahkan nilai moral generasi muda. Program Mutiara Desa merupakan inovasi pendidikan berbasis pengalaman yang mengintegrasikan pembelajaran kontekstual dengan pengenalan budaya lokal Osing. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implementasi program Mutiara



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Desa dalam membentuk karakter siswa serta mengkaji relevansinya dengan prinsip-prinsip filsafat pendidikan Islam. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus di SMPN 1 Banyuwangi. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan siswa, keluarga asuh, dan guru pendamping, serta dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan siswa dalam aktivitas sosial dan budaya desa secara signifikan meningkatkan nilai empati, tanggung jawab sosial, kemandirian, dan penghargaan terhadap budaya lokal. Selain itu, program ini merefleksikan konsep pendidikan Islam seperti ta'dib dan tazkiyatun nafs melalui pengalaman langsung yang mendorong internalisasi nilai secara mendalam. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan model pendidikan karakter berbasis pengalaman yang integratif, kontekstual, dan relevan bagi pendidikan formal di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: *Pendidikan Karakter; Pembelajaran Berbasis Pengalaman; Budaya Osing; Mutiara Desa; Pendidikan Islam.*

INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a strategic issue in contemporary global society as it is closely related to moral quality and social sustainability (Asif et al., 2020; Islamic et al., 2024; Zhanbayev et al., 2023). In the era of globalization and digitalization, significant value transformations have influenced the behavior and mindset of younger generations (point). These changes often lead to moral crises, such as declining empathy, increasing individualism, and deviant behaviors among adolescents (reason). Recent studies indicate that technological advancement without adequate value-based education may weaken students' character and cultural identity (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Kristjánsson, 2024; Moorthy et al., 2021; Watts & Kristjánsson, 2022). Therefore, strengthening value- and experience-based character education is essential to maintain a balance between technological progress and moral development among young people (conclusion).

However, despite its inclusion in educational policies, the implementation of character education continues to face structural and pedagogical challenges. Learning approaches that primarily emphasize cognitive achievement often fail to foster deep internalization of moral values among students (Lickona, 1996). Furthermore, research suggests that many character education programs remain ineffective due to the lack of integration between theoretical instruction and real-life application (Krettenauer & Anderson, 2022; Nucci, 2006, 2024). This condition reveals a gap between the intended goals of character education and its practical implementation, highlighting the need for more contextual and experiential learning approaches.

Empirical phenomena in educational practice demonstrate the emergence of experiential learning as an alternative solution. One notable example is the “Mutiara Desa” program at SMPN 1 Banyuwangi, where students live with host families in rural communities and directly engage in social and cultural activities. This program enables students to experience and internalize social values in a more authentic manner. Studies have shown that experiential learning significantly contributes to character formation as it involves direct engagement and reflective processes (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Morris, 2020).

In the literature, character education based on local wisdom has been widely recognized as a relevant and effective approach. Research indicates that integrating local cultural values into education strengthens students’ moral identity and enhances their engagement in the learning process (Iswatiningsih, 2019; Sihaloho et al., 2023). Moreover, recent studies emphasize that character education combining social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions is more effective in developing holistic personality traits among learners (Carney, 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). From the perspective of Islamic education, concepts such as *ta’dib* and *tazkiyatun nafs* highlight the importance of character formation through lived experiences and habitual practice (Al-Attas, 1980; Fauziyah & Azaria, 2024; Masduki, 2024).

Nevertheless, previous studies still present several limitations. Many existing works are predominantly conceptual and lack in-depth empirical exploration of experiential learning in culturally embedded contexts. Additionally, studies integrating experiential learning with Islamic educational philosophy remain limited (Abd Rahman et al., 2022). Research that specifically examines the relationship between direct social experiences and the internalization of moral and spiritual values is also scarce (Nucci, 2024; Watts & Kristjánsson, 2022). These limitations indicate a significant research gap that needs to be addressed, particularly in developing an integrative and context-based model of character education.

In response to this gap, this study offers a novel contribution (state of the art) by examining the “Mutiara Desa” program as an integrative model combining experiential learning, local wisdom, and Islamic educational philosophy. The novelty of this research lies in linking empirical dimensions (students’ lived experiences) with theoretical constructs such as *ta’dib*, *tazkiyatun nafs*, and *insan kamil*. This approach aligns with global educational trends emphasizing holistic education as a means to foster comprehensive character development (Carney, 2022; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Therefore, this study contributes to the

advancement of experience-based character education grounded in strong philosophical foundations.

Accordingly, this research addresses the following questions: How is the “Mutiarra Desa” program implemented in shaping students’ character, and to what extent does it reflect the principles of Islamic educational philosophy? The objective of this study is to analyze the processes and impacts of experiential learning on students’ character development and to examine its relevance to Islamic educational concepts. The central argument of this study is that experiential learning integrated with local cultural and spiritual values fosters stronger character internalization compared to conventional approaches and provides a significant contribution to the development of contextual and applicable character education models (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Morris, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of the “Mutiarra Desa” program in shaping students’ character. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables researchers to explore meanings, experiences, and participants’ perspectives comprehensively within their natural social context (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The case study design was applied as this research focuses on an intensive examination of a specific phenomenon within a bounded context, namely the implementation of the “Mutiarra Desa” program in both school and community settings (Yin, 2018). This approach is considered appropriate for capturing the complexity of social interactions, experiential learning processes, and the internalization of character values in real-life contexts (Tisdell et al., 2025).

The research was conducted at SMPN 1 Banyuwangi, with field activities taking place in Kemiren Village, Banyuwangi Regency, East Java, Indonesia. The selection of this location was based on several considerations. First, the “Mutiarra Desa” program represents a flagship initiative that integrates experiential learning with the introduction of Osing local culture. Second, Kemiren Village is widely recognized as a center for preserving Osing cultural traditions, maintaining authentic local wisdom values that are highly relevant to character education research. Third, the accessibility of the site and the openness of both the school and the local community supported the data collection process. The study was carried out during the program implementation period, which lasted for three days and two nights, and was complemented by additional data collection conducted before and after the program to ensure a more comprehensive understanding.

Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation was conducted by directly engaging in students' activities throughout the program in order to observe social interactions, behaviors, and learning dynamics in context (Musante & DeWalt, 2010; Spradley, 2016). In-depth interviews were carried out using a semi-structured format with informants selected through purposive sampling, including student participants, foster families, and accompanying teachers. This technique allowed the researcher to explore participants' subjective experiences and perceived meanings in depth (Patton, 2014). In addition, documentation in the form of photographs, videos, field notes, and official program documents was used as supporting data to strengthen findings from observation and interviews (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, involving systematic processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2018). In the initial stage, the collected data were filtered and focused on information relevant to the research objectives. The data were then presented in descriptive narratives, interview excerpts, and thematic groupings to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships. Coding was performed iteratively to generate key themes, such as the internalization of character values, students' social experiences, and the integration of Islamic educational values. The interpretation process involved linking empirical findings with key concepts in Islamic educational philosophy, including *ta'dib*, *tazkiyatun nafs*, and *insan kamil*, to produce a deeper and more contextualized understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through several strategies, including triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, and audit trail. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from multiple sources and methods, such as observation, interviews, and documentation, to ensure consistency of findings (Denzin, 2017). Member checking was performed by confirming preliminary findings with participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, prolonged engagement through direct involvement in the program activities allowed for a deeper contextual understanding. An audit trail was maintained by systematically documenting the entire research process to ensure transparency and credibility (Lincoln, 1985). Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to demonstrate a high level of validity and reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study focus on the internalization of students' character values through the *Mutiara Desa* program. Operationally, the sub-findings are defined as the process of character formation that emerges through students' direct experiences in village community life. The identified character values include empathy, social responsibility, independence, simplicity, and appreciation of local culture. These values emerged through students' involvement in daily activities, such as helping with household chores, interacting with foster families, and participating in the social and cultural activities of the Osing community.

The interview with one student revealed a shift in the way students perceived social life. The student stated:

"I learned to appreciate others more after living in the village because I directly saw how people lived simply while helping one another."

This statement indicates the development of empathy and social awareness. The researcher interprets that direct experience in a social environment different from students' everyday lives becomes an important factor in fostering empathy. Intensive interaction with the village community provides authentic learning experiences that are difficult to obtain through classroom instruction alone.

The interview with an accompanying teacher also showed that the program contributed to changes in students' behavior. The teacher stated:

"Students who were usually passive in class became more active during the program, especially in interacting with the community."

This finding indicates an improvement in students' self-confidence and social skills. The researcher interprets that a contextual and informal learning environment provides space for students to express themselves more freely. This suggests that experiential learning can promote character development not only cognitively, but also affectively and socially.

The observation results showed that students were actively involved in various activities, such as helping foster families, participating in community activities, and engaging in local cultural practices. At the beginning of the program, some students appeared awkward and passive; however, over time, they demonstrated significant adaptation, such as taking the initiative to help with household tasks and interact with village residents. The researcher interprets this change as evidence of a gradual social learning process. The village environment

functioned as a learning space that enabled students to experience character values directly in real-life practices.

Based on these data, it can be restated that the *Mutiara Desa* program functions as an effective medium for shaping students' character through direct experience. Empathy developed through social interaction, responsibility emerged through involvement in daily activities, independence was formed through adaptation to a new environment, and appreciation of local culture was gained through direct cultural experience. Thus, character formation in this program was not merely theoretical but occurred through experience, habituation, and reflection.

The data pattern shows that students' level of involvement in social activities became a key factor in determining the success of character formation. Students who were more actively involved demonstrated more significant changes than those who were less engaged. This pattern indicates that direct experience and the intensity of social interaction have a strong relationship with the internalization of character values. In other words, the higher the students' involvement in social experiences, the stronger the character formation that occurred.

Table 1. The Ideal Influence of the Mutiara Desa Program on Students' Character Formation

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Student	"I learned to live simply and care more about others."	Empathy, simplicity
Student	"I became more independent because I had to adapt to a new environment."	Independence, adaptation
Accompanying teacher	"Students became more active and confident in interacting with the community."	Self-confidence, social skills
Foster family	"The students began helping with household chores without being asked."	Responsibility, care
Village community member	"The students began to understand local culture through daily activities."	Cultural appreciation

The table shows that the influence of the *Mutiara Desa* program on students' character formation occurred through direct interaction between students and their social environment. Each informant provided complementary perspectives regarding changes in students' character. Students emphasized their subjective experiences in understanding empathy and independence, while teachers and foster families highlighted behavioral changes that could be directly observed. This

indicates that character formation occurred not only at the level of individual awareness but also in concrete actions recognized by the surrounding community.

Furthermore, the table indicates that character values were formed through habituation in daily activities. Simple activities, such as helping with household chores or interacting with community members, became important media for developing responsibility and social care. The role of the village community as a learning environment was also significant because it provided contextual experiences that strengthened students' understanding of local culture. Thus, character formation in this program was integrative, involving interaction among the individual, the social environment, and direct experience.

The main pattern emerging from the data shows a linear relationship between direct experience and the internalization of character values. The process of character formation occurred through several stages: initial adaptation, involvement in activities, behavioral habituation, and value internalization. Students who participated more actively tended to show more significant character changes. Conversely, students with lower levels of involvement showed slower changes. This pattern confirms that the success of experience-based character education strongly depends on the degree of participation and the intensity of students' social interaction.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the *Mutiara Desa* program provides a meaningful experiential space for students to internalize character values through direct engagement with village life. This finding strengthens the idea that character education cannot rely solely on cognitive instruction or moral explanation in the classroom. Instead, it requires concrete experience, social participation, and reflective engagement. This is consistent with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes that learning becomes meaningful when individuals are directly involved in experience, reflection, conceptualization, and action (Kolb & Kolb, 2023; Morris, 2022). In the context of this study, students did not merely learn about empathy, responsibility, and independence as abstract concepts; they experienced these values through daily interaction with foster families and the Osing community.

The finding that students developed empathy and social responsibility through interaction with foster families is also in line with previous studies on character education. Berkowitz and Bier (2022) argue that effective character education must involve moral modeling, social practice, and a supportive community environment. Similarly, Nucci et al. (2023) emphasize that moral

development is strengthened when students encounter real-life situations that require ethical decision-making and social responsibility. In the *Mutiara Desa* program, the village community functioned as a living moral environment where students could observe, imitate, and practice social values. Therefore, the program demonstrates that character education becomes more effective when schools extend the learning environment beyond classroom boundaries.

The students' increased independence and adaptability also support the view that contextual learning contributes to holistic personal development. The results show that students who were initially passive or awkward gradually became more confident in interacting with the community. This finding corresponds with Darling-Hammond et al. (2022), who argue that holistic education should integrate cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical dimensions of learning. The *Mutiara Desa* program reflects this holistic model because students were not only exposed to knowledge about local culture but were also placed in situations that required them to communicate, cooperate, adapt, and take responsibility. This process shows that character formation is not instant but develops gradually through repeated social experience.

In relation to local wisdom, the findings confirm that Osing culture serves as an important source of character education. Students' appreciation of local culture emerged through direct participation in village life and cultural practices. This is consistent with Iswatiningsih (2019), who explains that local wisdom can strengthen character education because it contains values of solidarity, responsibility, cooperation, and cultural identity. Sihaloho et al. (2023) also emphasize that education is closely related to social change; therefore, learning rooted in community life can help students understand the meaning of social responsibility in a broader context. In this study, Osing culture was not treated merely as cultural content, but as a living value system that shaped students' moral and social awareness.

From the perspective of Islamic educational philosophy, the findings can be interpreted through the concepts of *ta'dib*, *tazkiyatun nafs*, and *insan kamil*. The concept of *ta'dib* emphasizes education as the formation of adab, or proper moral conduct, rather than merely the transfer of knowledge (Al-Attas, 1980). The *Mutiara Desa* program reflects this principle because students learned character values through lived practice, not only through verbal instruction. The concept of *tazkiyatun nafs* is also relevant because the program encouraged students to reflect on simplicity, humility, care, and responsibility. These values represent a process of moral purification and self-improvement, as also discussed by Fauziyah et al. (2024) in relation to character formation.

The findings also reveal that the degree of student involvement influenced the strength of character internalization. Students who actively participated in household, social, and cultural activities demonstrated more visible character changes than those who were less involved. This finding supports previous research suggesting that experiential learning is most effective when learners are actively engaged rather than positioned as passive observers (Morris, 2022). It also strengthens the argument that character formation requires participation, habituation, and reflection. Thus, the effectiveness of the *Mutiara Desa* program depends not only on the existence of the program itself but also on the quality of students' engagement during the activities.

However, this study also shows that character formation through short-term experiential programs has limitations. The program lasted only three days and two nights, while character development requires continuous reinforcement. This finding is consistent with Lickona (2022), who emphasizes that character education must be sustained through long-term habituation, school culture, and community support. Therefore, while the *Mutiara Desa* program successfully initiated character transformation, follow-up activities are needed to ensure that the values learned during the program continue to be practiced in students' daily lives after returning to school and home.

Compared with previous studies discussed in the introduction, this research offers a more integrative contribution. Previous studies have generally examined character education, local wisdom, experiential learning, or Islamic educational values separately. This study connects these dimensions in one empirical context by showing how experiential learning, using local culture, and Islamic educational philosophy interact in shaping students' character. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in its integrative framework: character education is understood not only as a pedagogical strategy, but also as a cultural and spiritual process grounded in lived experience.

Overall, the discussion confirms that the *Mutiara Desa* program can be understood as a contextual model of experience-based character education. The program bridges school learning, community life, local culture, and Islamic educational values. Its contribution lies in showing that character education becomes more meaningful when students are placed in authentic social settings where moral values are practiced, observed, and reflected upon. Therefore, this study strengthens the argument that future character education programs should be designed not merely as curriculum content, but as transformative experiences that involve students, schools, families, and communities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the *Mutiara Desa* program serves as an effective experiential learning model in fostering students' character development through direct engagement with social and cultural village life. The findings demonstrate that students' participation in real-life community activities contributes significantly to the internalization of key character values, including empathy, social responsibility, independence, and appreciation of local culture. These values are not merely understood conceptually but are developed through lived experiences, habituation, and social interaction. The study also confirms that the effectiveness of character formation is closely related to the level of student engagement. Students who actively participated in social and cultural activities exhibited more substantial character development compared to those with lower levels of involvement. This indicates that experiential learning, when combined with meaningful social interaction, plays a critical role in strengthening value internalization.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the relevance of experiential learning theory and supports the principles of Islamic educational philosophy, particularly *ta'dib* and *tazkiyatun nafs*, which emphasize character formation through practice, reflection, and moral habituation. The *Mutiara Desa* program demonstrates that character education becomes more effective when it integrates experiential learning, local cultural values, and spiritual dimensions within authentic social contexts. However, this study also identifies several limitations. The relatively short duration of the program limits the depth of long-term character internalization, and variations in students' backgrounds influence the effectiveness of value adaptation. These findings suggest that sustained follow-up programs and continuous reinforcement are necessary to ensure the long-term impact of character education.

Therefore, future research is recommended to explore longitudinal impacts of experiential character education and to examine additional factors such as family environment, school culture, and individual psychological differences. Practically, educators are encouraged to design character education programs that extend beyond classroom instruction by incorporating contextual, experience-based, and culturally grounded learning models.

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