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Deep Learning Pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education and Religious Character Formation among Generation Z

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Abstract: This study examines how deep-learning pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education creates opportunities for religious character formation among Generation Z students. Using a qualitative case-study design, data were collected from 20 purposively selected students, teachers, administrators, and parents through semi-structured interviews, participatory classroom observations, and document analysis. The data were thematically analyzed with NVivo 12 Pro. The findings show that teachers integrated mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning through reflective journaling, contextualized discussion, storytelling, collaborative projects, and problem-solving. These practices encouraged reflection, dialogue, active participation, contextual meaning-making, and the application of Islamic values in everyday life. Religious-character formation emerged as a gradual, context-dependent process enabled by teacher planning, institutional support, curriculum coordination, and social interaction, rather than as an immediate consequence of knowledge transmission. The study's originality lies in proposing a pedagogical pathway linking educational conditions, learning design, student meaning-making, and opportunities for character formation. It contributes a context-sensitive framework for understanding how deep-learning pedagogy can support moral agency, spiritual resilience, and ethical conduct, while informing teacher development, curriculum design, and future longitudinal and multisite research across contemporary Islamic education.

***Abstrak**: Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana pedagogi pembelajaran mendalam dalam Pendidikan Agama Islam membuka peluang pembentukan karakter religius siswa Generasi Z. Penelitian menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif dengan melibatkan 20 siswa, guru, pengelola sekolah, dan orang tua yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan NVivo 12 Pro. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru mengintegrasikan pembelajaran berkesadaran, bermakna, dan menggembirakan melalui jurnal reflektif, diskusi kontekstual, bercerita, proyek kolaboratif, serta pemecahan masalah. Praktik tersebut mendorong refleksi, dialog, partisipasi aktif, pemaknaan kontekstual, dan penerapan nilai-nilai Islam dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Pembentukan karakter religius berlangsung secara bertahap dan bergantung pada konteks, dengan dukungan perencanaan guru, koordinasi kurikulum, lingkungan kelembagaan, serta interaksi sosial, bukan sebagai akibat langsung dari penyampaian pengetahuan. Kebaruan penelitian terletak pada pengembangan jalur pedagogis yang menghubungkan kondisi pendidikan, desain pembelajaran, pemaknaan siswa, dan peluang pembentukan karakter. Penelitian ini menyumbangkan kerangka kontekstual untuk memahami penguatan agensi moral, ketahanan spiritual, dan perilaku etis, sekaligus memberikan landasan bagi pengembangan kompetensi guru, penyusunan kurikulum, serta penelitian longitudinal dan multisitus pada pendidikan Islam kontemporer yang relevan bagi Generasi Z.*

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INTRODUCTION

Generation Z's learning experiences are increasingly shaped by digital connectivity, immediate access to information, social-media interaction, and fluid processes of identity formation. In Islamic education, these conditions create both opportunities and challenges. Digital environments provide broad access to Qur'anic resources, religious lectures, scholarly discussions, and peer communities. Still, the abundance and uneven authority of online content may complicate how young people evaluate religious claims and translate knowledge into everyday conduct. Digital religion research shows that online and offline religious experiences are increasingly interconnected and that digital media reshape religious authority, community, identity, and practice (Campbell, 2013). Social media has consequently become a formative space in which Generation Z encounters, interprets, and expresses religious meanings (Liu et al., 2025). In Indonesia, this mediation has produced increasingly hybrid relationships between religious knowledge, authority, and everyday practice (Rohmawati et al., 2024). Islamic Religious Education must therefore function not only as a means of transmitting doctrine but also as a pedagogical space where learners critically interpret, personally appropriate, and ethically enact Islamic values (Adi et al., 2026).

Religious character cannot be reduced to religious knowledge or visible compliance. It encompasses cognitive, affective, moral, spiritual, and behavioural dimensions, including what learners know and value, how they interpret moral situations, and how consistently they regulate their conduct according to internalized principles. Educational contexts contribute to this formation because learning is inseparable from students' developing values, commitments, social roles, and worldviews (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Religious-character formation is thus connected to moral identity, in which moral commitments become part of the self and motivate action. Krettenauer (2020) explains that moral identity may develop from externally regulated compliance toward increasingly autonomous moral commitment. Moral identity can also be understood as a developmental goal whose meaning and motivational force continue to evolve from childhood to adulthood (Krettenauer, 2022). This distinction is particularly relevant to Islamic Religious Education, whose purpose extends beyond recalling concepts of belief, worship, and ethics toward cultivating *akhlaq*, moral responsibility, reflective judgment, self-regulation, and meaningful action.

Students may reproduce religious rules without integrating them into their self-understanding or applying them when supervision is absent. Conversely, learning environments that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness can promote deeper internalization and higher-quality motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The central pedagogical question is therefore not merely whether students understand Islamic teachings, but whether learning enables them to connect those teachings with personal experience, examine moral situations, reflect on their intentions and actions, and make responsible decisions (Krettenauer, 2020).

The distinction between surface and deep approaches to learning provides a useful foundation for addressing this question. In this study, *deep learning* does not refer to artificial intelligence, neural networks, or machine learning. It refers to a pedagogical orientation in which learners seek conceptual understanding, connect

new knowledge with prior understanding, examine relationships among ideas, reflect on meaning, and apply knowledge in authentic situations. Surface learning is more commonly associated with memorization, reproduction, fragmented knowledge, and task completion with limited concern for meaning, whereas deep approaches involve understanding, analysis, integration, reflection, and meaning-making (Smarandache et al., 2021).

Deep and surface learning should not, however, be treated as fixed learner characteristics or as a rigid binary. Students may combine different approaches according to the task, assessment, motivation, and learning environment. Qualitative evidence shows that apparently similar surface-learning scores can conceal considerable variation in students' intentions and practices (Postareff et al., 2018). Studies also caution against separating deep and surface approaches from the contexts in which learning occurs (Godor, 2016; *Contrasting Undergraduate Mathematics Students*, 2021). Deep learning is better understood as a context-sensitive orientation emerging from interactions among learners, teachers, instructional tasks, assessment, motivation, classroom relationships, and institutional culture (Urhahne, 2020).

Student-centred instruction does not automatically produce deep learning. Its effectiveness depends on students' perceptions of workload, the authenticity and clarity of tasks, assessment demands, teacher support, and learners' readiness for active participation (Baeten et al., 2010). Teaching and assessment that require active involvement, conceptual integration, and meaningful application are more likely to support deeper approaches than instruction centred on passive reception and reproduction (Hailikari et al., 2022). Relevant content, active learning, teacher enthusiasm, constructive feedback, and supportive relationships may also facilitate deep engagement. However, their effects remain dependent on students' motivation and interpretation of the learning environment (*What Educators Could Do to Facilitate Students' Use of a Deep Approach to Learning*, 2020). Deep-learning pedagogy must therefore be examined as a pedagogical ecology rather than as an isolated technique.

Contemporary Indonesian educational discourse commonly articulates pedagogical deep learning through mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning. Mindful learning emphasizes attention, awareness, metacognition, and reflection. Meaningful learning connects new knowledge with prior understanding, experience, contemporary concerns, and authentic contexts. Joyful learning creates an emotionally supportive and participatory environment that promotes curiosity, belonging, intellectual challenge, and constructive interaction. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing components of an integrated pedagogical framework (Andayanie et al., 2025). They become educationally consequential only when translated into concrete learning activities, classroom interactions, and assessment practices rather than remaining abstract policy terminology (Morris, 2020).

In Islamic Religious Education, mindful learning can be developed through reflective questioning, contemplative activities, self-assessment, journals, moral dilemmas, and opportunities to examine the relationship between Islamic principles and personal conduct. Meaningful learning connects Islamic concepts with students' social relationships, academic lives, digital communication, peer interactions, and contemporary moral problems (Hasanah & Permana, 2025). Students' interest,

perceived relevance, workload, and interpretation of the learning environment affect their willingness to engage deeply (Smarandache et al., 2021). Joyful learning complements these processes by creating an emotionally safe environment in which students can ask questions, discuss differences, collaborate, and explore religious issues without experiencing learning primarily as coercive or punitive (Fadhila, 2026).

These dimensions may support religious-character formation through related but distinct mechanisms. Mindful learning may strengthen moral awareness and self-examination; meaningful learning may connect Islamic teachings with lived experience and moral decision-making; and joyful learning may provide the relational safety required for dialogue and participation. Nevertheless, these relationships are neither simple nor deterministic. Religious character is also influenced by family socialization, school culture, teacher role modelling, peer relationships, institutional expectations, prior religious experience, and digital environments. Deep-learning pedagogy should therefore be treated as one possible mechanism within a broader ecology of religious and moral development rather than as a sufficient cause of character change.

This ecological perspective is consistent with the multidimensional objectives of Islamic Religious Education. Students are expected not only to understand Islamic beliefs and practices but also to embody Islamic values in everyday life. Islamic-education scholarship emphasizes the integration of intellectual, spiritual, and moral development rather than separating religious knowledge from character formation (Fatimah & Sumarni, 2024). Research in Indonesia similarly indicates that religious education becomes more consequential when Islamic values are translated into meaningful experiences and daily practices rather than delivered exclusively as declarative knowledge (Hidayat, 2024; Irpan & Sain, 2024; Lestari, 2022). Religious-character formation can thus be understood as the gradual integration of knowledge, affective commitment, moral reflection, identity, and self-regulated action.

Internalization is central to this process. Behaviour driven primarily by surveillance, rewards, punishment, or institutional pressure may remain dependent on external authority. When learners interpret Islamic teachings, relate them to experience, reflect on their significance, evaluate possible actions, and assume responsibility for their decisions, those teachings may become more fully integrated into their self-understanding. Self-Determination Theory similarly demonstrates that autonomy-supportive environments facilitate the internalization of externally introduced values (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In Islamic educational terms, this process represents movement from knowing religious norms toward developing *akhlaq* as an embodied, reflective, and self-regulated orientation.

The digital context of Generation Z complicates this internalization. Young people increasingly encounter religious knowledge through multiple platforms and authorities rather than exclusively through families, schools, or conventional religious institutions. Online Islamic learning offers accessibility and participation but may also expose learners to fragmented interpretations, contested authority, misleading information, and religious confusion. Research among Indonesian Muslim adolescents shows that online Islamic learning can produce both meaningful opportunities and experiences of uncertainty when learners lack

adequate interpretive guidance (Abdullah et al., 2024; Abdullah, Mufid, Ju'subaidi, & Purwanto, 2024). Digital environments should nevertheless not be viewed only as threats. They are formative spaces where young people construct religious meaning, encounter different perspectives, negotiate authority, and develop religious identities. Religious-identity development itself emerges through interactions among personal commitment, social relationships, community expectations, and wider cultural environments (de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al., 2019).

The pedagogical task of Islamic Religious Education is therefore to develop the intellectual, ethical, reflective, and spiritual capacities students need to navigate digital religious environments responsibly. Digital religious practices influence identity, community, authority, and the relationship between mediated and embodied religious life (Campbell, 2013). Students need to evaluate the credibility of religious information, recognize competing claims to authority, relate digital content to established Islamic sources, consider the ethical consequences of online participation, and connect online engagement with responsible offline conduct. These capacities reflect pedagogical deep learning because they require interpretation, critical connection, reflection, contextual application, and moral judgment rather than information retrieval alone.

This challenge is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where religious education is formally connected with character formation, citizenship, social interaction, and identity. Religious understanding, tolerance, identity, and social relations are closely interconnected within the educational environment (Utami, 2022). The quality of religious education should therefore be assessed not only through curricular mastery but also through how students interpret diversity, negotiate relationships, evaluate moral challenges, and enact religious principles. Islamic-education scholarship likewise calls for learning models that respond to social and technological change while preserving moral and spiritual orientations (Rodhiyana, 2023; Sapiudin et al., 2025).

Despite their relevance, research on deep approaches to learning and scholarship on Islamic religious-character formation have largely developed along parallel trajectories. The deep-learning literature has examined conceptual understanding, engagement, motivation, assessment, and learning environments, but much of it concerns higher education or general disciplinary contexts (Baeten et al., 2010; Godor, 2016). Islamic character-education scholarship has focused on value internalization, habituation, moral development, religious identity, teacher exemplarity, and educational culture. Less attention has been given to the mechanisms through which deep-learning principles may facilitate the interpretation and internalization of Islamic values. Although recent Indonesian scholarship discusses mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning in Islamic Religious Education, empirical explanations of how teachers enact these principles and how students experience them remain limited (Suryadi et al., 2026).

The research gap is therefore not simply a shortage of publications using the term *deep learning*. An integrated explanation connecting pedagogical experience with religious-character formation remains underdeveloped. The relationships between mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning and religious-character development require further conceptual clarification. Limited qualitative evidence shows how teachers translate these principles into classroom practices, reflection,

interaction, learning tasks, and assessment. Students' interpretations are also insufficiently represented, particularly concerning how they connect Islamic teachings with their identities, relationships, digital experiences, and everyday moral choices. Moreover, the interaction between pedagogy and contextual conditions such as teacher support, family socialization, peer relationships, school culture, and prior religious experience remains inadequately explained.

This limitation matters because deep learning does not arise automatically from instructional innovation. Motivation, self-efficacy, curriculum, assessment, perceived relevance, and classroom climate influence whether students engage deeply or superficially (*The Deep Approach to Learning as a Measure of Quality Education in Accreditation*, 2026). Reflective or student-centred activities likewise cannot be assumed to produce internalized religious commitments merely because they appear innovative. Teacher credibility, family religiosity, peer norms, school expectations, social desirability, and previous religious formation may also influence students' responses (Liesdiana et al., 2026; Yuliyanti & Khoerunnisa, 2026). Relationships between deep-learning pedagogy and religious character should consequently be examined as gradual, interpretive, socially situated, and context-dependent rather than immediate or strictly causal.

Against this background, the study conceptualizes pedagogical deep learning as a contextualized process connecting Islamic knowledge with students' awareness, experience, reflection, interaction, and action. Mindful learning refers to conscious and reflective engagement with Islamic concepts, attitudes, intentions, and conduct. Meaningful learning connects Islamic teachings with students' experiences, contemporary problems, digital environments, and social realities. Joyful learning creates a supportive and participatory environment that encourages curiosity, collaboration, involvement, and dialogue. Religious character is understood not merely as observable behaviour but as an integrated formation involving religious knowledge, affective commitment, moral reflection, self-regulation, identity, and the capacity to enact Islamic values. This formulation avoids assuming that short-term pedagogical experiences produce definitive character transformation.

The study examines how deep-learning pedagogy is designed and enacted in Islamic Religious Education, how Generation Z students experience and interpret mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning, and what contextual mechanisms support or constrain religious-character formation. By integrating the Students' Approaches to Learning perspective, pedagogical deep-learning discourse, moral-identity theory, Self-Determination Theory, and scholarship on digital religious identity, the study develops a context-sensitive explanation of the relationship between pedagogical depth and the internalization of Islamic values (Nasir et al., 2026).

Accordingly, the study asks how Islamic Religious Education teachers design and enact deep-learning pedagogy, how Generation Z students experience and interpret mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning practices, and what contextual mechanisms support or constrain religious-character formation through deep-learning pedagogy. Its contribution lies in explaining how reflective engagement, contextual meaning-making, emotionally supportive participation, student agency, and the wider educational ecology may interact in the gradual formation and internalization of religious character among Generation Z.

METHOD

This study employed an interpretive qualitative case study design to examine how deep-learning pedagogy was designed and enacted in Islamic Religious Education and how Generation Z students experienced its contribution to religious-character formation. A qualitative case study was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth investigation of a contemporary pedagogical process within its natural educational context and allowed multiple sources of evidence to be integrated (Crowe et al., 2011).

The case was bounded by one junior secondary school, its Islamic Religious Education programme, the teachers responsible for delivering the subject, and the Generation Z students who participated in the observed learning activities. The temporal boundary covered the planning, implementation, and evaluation of Islamic Religious Education lessons conducted during the second semester of the 2025–2026 academic year. The analytical focus was restricted to mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning practices, classroom interaction, student meaning-making, and contextual factors associated with religious-character formation. Programmes concerning dress regulations, sharia clothing, or other school disciplinary policies were not included because they fell outside the research questions.

The school was selected purposively because its Islamic Religious Education teachers had incorporated reflective activities, contextualized instruction, collaborative discussion, project-based learning, and other student-centred practices consistent with pedagogical deep learning. The site therefore provided an information-rich case through which the relationship between instructional design, student experience, and religious-character formation could be examined.

Participants were recruited through criterion-based purposive sampling. Eligibility required direct involvement in the planning, implementation, experience, or institutional support of the Islamic Religious Education learning activities examined in this study. The final sample consisted of 20 participants: two Islamic Religious Education teachers, twelve students, two school administrators or curriculum personnel, and four parents or guardians. The student participants were enrolled in the classes observed during the study and represented different levels of classroom participation and academic achievement. Teachers were included because they designed and implemented the learning activities, administrators were included because they supported curriculum implementation, and parents or guardians were included to provide perspectives on students' religious conduct beyond the classroom.

Sample adequacy was evaluated using the principle of information power rather than through a mechanical claim of data saturation. Information power depends on the specificity of the sample, the focus of the research questions, the quality of dialogue, the theoretical framework, and the analytical strategy (Malterud et al., 2016). The participants had direct and varied experience of the phenomenon, and the combined dataset provided sufficient depth and diversity to address the research questions while allowing convergent, divergent, and negative accounts to be examined.

Participation was voluntary. Adult participants provided written informed consent. Because the student participants were minors, written consent was

obtained from parents or guardians, and assent was obtained from the students. The decision to participate or withdraw had no effect on students' grades, school status, or relationships with teachers.

Data were collected from January to February 2026 through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and document analysis. The use of multiple sources enabled the pedagogical process to be examined from different perspectives and supported a contextualized understanding of the case (Crowe et al., 2011).

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 20 participants. Interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents or guardians lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes, while student interviews lasted approximately 25 to 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian in a private and mutually agreed setting. With participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Teacher interviews examined instructional planning, understandings of pedagogical deep learning, classroom strategies, assessment, institutional support, and perceived relationships between learning experiences and religious-character formation. Student interviews explored experiences of mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning; opportunities for reflection and participation; connections between Islamic teachings and daily life; and perceptions of changes in understanding, moral reasoning, and self-regulation. Administrator interviews addressed curriculum implementation, teacher support, and the institutional learning environment. Parent or guardian interviews focused on whether and how students discussed or enacted Islamic values outside the classroom.

Six Islamic Religious Education lessons were observed. Each observation lasted approximately 80 minutes and focused on teacher instruction, questioning, student participation, collaborative interaction, reflective activities, contextual application, and opportunities to relate Islamic teachings to contemporary moral and digital issues. The observed activities included storytelling, group discussion, problem solving, reflective journaling, and project-based learning. The researcher adopted a non-participant role and recorded descriptive and reflective field notes immediately during and after each lesson.

Documentary data included lesson plans, teaching materials, student worksheets, reflective-journal instructions, project guidelines, and assessment materials. These documents were examined to determine how mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning principles were represented in instructional planning and how the intended learning design corresponded with observed classroom practices. Interviews, observations, and documents were treated as complementary sources rather than as interchangeable forms of evidence.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which recognizes themes as interpretive constructions developed through the researcher's sustained engagement with the dataset rather than as objective entities waiting to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analysis began during data collection and continued iteratively as interviews, observations, and documents were reviewed.

The researcher first became familiar with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, field notes, and instructional documents while recording

preliminary analytical observations. Meaningful segments were then coded systematically. Coding combined inductive attention to participants' accounts with deductive sensitivity to the study's conceptual framework. The deductive concepts included mindful engagement, contextual meaning-making, positive emotional participation, moral reflection, internalization, self-regulation, and educational ecology. Inductive codes captured unexpected experiences, tensions, variations, and contextual influences emerging from the data.

Codes were compared across participant groups and data sources and subsequently organized into broader patterns of shared meaning. Candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the complete dataset to ensure internal coherence, analytical distinctiveness, and relevance to the research questions. For example, teachers' descriptions of storytelling, moral dilemmas, reflective journals, discussion, and problem solving were compared with classroom observations and students' accounts to determine whether these practices supported reflection and contextual meaning-making. Contradictory and negative cases were retained and used to refine the scope of each theme rather than being removed from the analysis.

NVivo 12 Pro was used to store transcripts, organize codes, retrieve coded segments, and compare patterns across participant groups and data sources. The software supported systematic data management but was not treated as a source of interpretation, validity, or methodological rigour. Analytical decisions remained the responsibility of the researchers.

The researchers recognized that their educational and religious backgrounds could influence data collection and interpretation. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to document assumptions, expectations, emotional responses, methodological decisions, and changes in interpretation. Reflexive memoing was also used to distinguish participants' accounts from the researchers' theoretical interpretations. During theme development, the researchers repeatedly examined whether emerging claims were sufficiently supported by the data or reflected prior expectations about the educational value of deep learning.

The researchers also considered the potential influence of power relations, particularly in interviews involving minors and school personnel. Student interviews were conducted without classroom teachers being present, and students were informed that there were no correct or institutionally preferred answers. Questions were framed openly to allow positive, negative, and ambivalent experiences to be expressed.

Trustworthiness was supported through methodological coherence, data triangulation, negative-case analysis, participant reflection, reflexive memoing, thick description, and an audit trail. Credibility was strengthened by comparing interview accounts with classroom observations and documentary evidence. Convergence across data sources was treated as corroborative, while divergence was examined as evidence of variation rather than methodological failure.

Negative-case analysis involved actively identifying accounts and observations that challenged emerging interpretations. These cases were used to qualify claims and clarify the conditions under which deep-learning practices appeared to support

or constrain religious-character formation. Preliminary interpretations were discussed with selected participants to verify the accuracy of contextual meanings and to reduce the possibility of misrepresentation. This process functioned as participant reflection rather than as an assumption that participants could provide a single final validation of the analysis.

Thick description was used to explain the pedagogical context, classroom activities, participant perspectives, and interactional processes so that readers could judge the transferability of the findings. An audit trail documented recruitment, data collection, coding decisions, theme development, negative cases, and revisions to the analytical framework. These procedures were guided by established criteria for credibility, sincerity, rich rigour, ethics, resonance, and methodological coherence in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Reporting was also informed by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research to strengthen transparency concerning the research team, participant selection, data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings (Tong et al., 2007).

The study followed the ethical procedures of the researchers' home institution, and written institutional permission was obtained before data collection. Participants received information explaining the study's objectives, procedures, voluntary nature, potential risks, confidentiality measures, and right to withdraw without penalty. Adult participants provided informed consent, while student participation required both parental or guardian consent and student assent.

Pseudonyms and participant codes were used in transcripts, analytical files, and the presentation of findings. Identifying details concerning participants and the research site were removed or generalized. Digital recordings, transcripts, observation notes, and documentary data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. Audio recordings were scheduled for secure deletion after the completion of transcription checking and the retention period required by institutional policy.

Because students were minors and teachers occupied positions of authority, particular attention was given to avoiding coercion. Teachers did not determine which students agreed to participate, were not present during student interviews, and did not receive individual student responses. The study involved no experimental intervention and did not alter students' grades, curriculum requirements, or access to educational activities.

This design enabled the study to examine pedagogical deep learning as a lived and context-dependent educational process. The integration of interviews, classroom observations, and documentary evidence connected teachers' pedagogical intentions with enacted practices and students' interpretations. The study did not seek to measure causal effects or statistically generalize its findings. Instead, it sought an analytically grounded explanation of how mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning practices may interact with student agency, classroom relationships, institutional support, and wider social influences in religious-character formation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis generated three interconnected findings. First, teachers deliberately designed deep-learning pedagogy by integrating mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning. Second, its classroom implementation enabled students to engage with Islamic knowledge through reflection, contextualization, interaction, and active participation. Third, religious-character formation emerged as a gradual and context-dependent process supported by reflective engagement, meaningful application, and an emotionally supportive learning environment. The implementation of these principles nevertheless varied according to teacher capacity, lesson content, classroom conditions, student participation, and institutional support.

Pedagogical Design and Enactment of Deep Learning

Analysis of teacher interviews, lesson-planning documents, and classroom observations showed that deep learning was not implemented as a single instructional technique. Teachers organized learning experiences around the interconnected dimensions of mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning. Lesson-planning documents demonstrated that these dimensions were incorporated into instructional objectives, activities, and assignments, while the interview data positioned Islamic Religious Education teachers as the main actors translating these principles into classroom practices.

Mindful learning was enacted through reflective questions, contemplative activities, self-assessment, and reflective journaling. These activities encouraged students to examine their understanding, attitudes, intentions, and behaviour in relation to Islamic values. Meaningful learning was implemented by connecting Islamic teachings with issues familiar to Generation Z, particularly digital ethics, social-media use, peer relationships, and everyday moral decisions. Joyful learning was reflected in storytelling, games, collaborative projects, discussions, and problem-solving activities intended to create an emotionally supportive and participatory classroom environment.

One teacher explained this pedagogical orientation as follows: “In the classroom, I try to create an atmosphere where students feel safe to ask questions, express their opinions, and explore their understanding of Islam. I use storytelling, group discussions, and problem-solving activities that require them to think critically and apply Islamic values to their daily lives.” (Islamic Religious Education Teacher 2, Interview, February 2026)

This account was consistent with the observational evidence. Classroom observations documented project-based activities, reflective journaling, collaborative discussions, storytelling, and problem-solving tasks. Rather than depending exclusively on teacher explanation, students were provided with opportunities to discuss interpretations, respond to moral questions, work with peers, and connect Islamic concepts with contemporary situations. Lesson-planning documents further confirmed that these activities formed part of the intended pedagogical design rather than occurring only as spontaneous classroom practices.

Implementation varied across lessons. Reflection was more prominent when the content required personal interpretation or self-assessment. Contextual meaning-making became more visible when teachers addressed digital communication, peer relationships, and contemporary moral issues. Collaborative and joyful elements were more evident in lessons involving projects, group discussion, games, or problem solving. The three dimensions therefore did not appear with equal intensity in every lesson. They functioned as a flexible pedagogical orientation whose expression depended on lesson objectives, instructional strategies, classroom interaction, and the nature of the content.

The data also showed that implementation was not determined by teachers alone. Teacher planning was supported by curriculum coordination, school leadership, access to instructional resources, and opportunities for professional development. Deep-learning pedagogy was consequently embedded within a wider educational environment rather than being attributable solely to individual teacher initiative.

Students' Experiences of Mindful Meaningful and Joyful Learning

The second finding concerned how students experienced Islamic learning through the observed activities. Classroom evidence indicated a movement away from exclusive dependence on teacher explanation toward questioning, discussion, collaborative problem solving, personal reflection, and application to everyday situations. These practices expanded the forms of participation available to students, although their engagement varied according to the activity, lesson content, and classroom conditions.

The mindful dimension was most visible when students were required to examine their understanding and behaviour. Reflective questions and journals provided opportunities for students to move from identifying an Islamic concept toward considering its relevance to their attitudes, intentions, and conduct. Reflective journaling was particularly important because it provided space for personal meaning-making that did not depend on students' willingness to speak publicly during classroom discussions.

The meaningful dimension emerged when teachers connected Islamic teachings with students' lived experiences. Observations and instructional materials showed that digital ethics, social-media behaviour, peer relationships, and contemporary moral dilemmas were used as contexts for discussing Islamic principles. Such contextualization allowed students to encounter religious knowledge as guidance for situations they experienced rather than as information detached from everyday life.

The joyful dimension was evident in the classroom atmosphere and modes of participation. Storytelling, collaborative projects, discussion, games, and problem-solving activities generated opportunities for students to ask questions, express opinions, and work with peers. The teacher's interview account indicated that this atmosphere was deliberately created to help students explore their understanding without fear of immediate judgment. Classroom observations supported this account by documenting active participation and peer interaction during collaborative activities.

Project-based learning provided documentary evidence of how students represented their understanding of deep learning. The student-produced artifact presented in Figure 1 identifies understanding, application, and reflection as central learning activities and connects meaningful, mindful, and joyful learning with collaboration, creative-media use, and religiously grounded learner attributes.

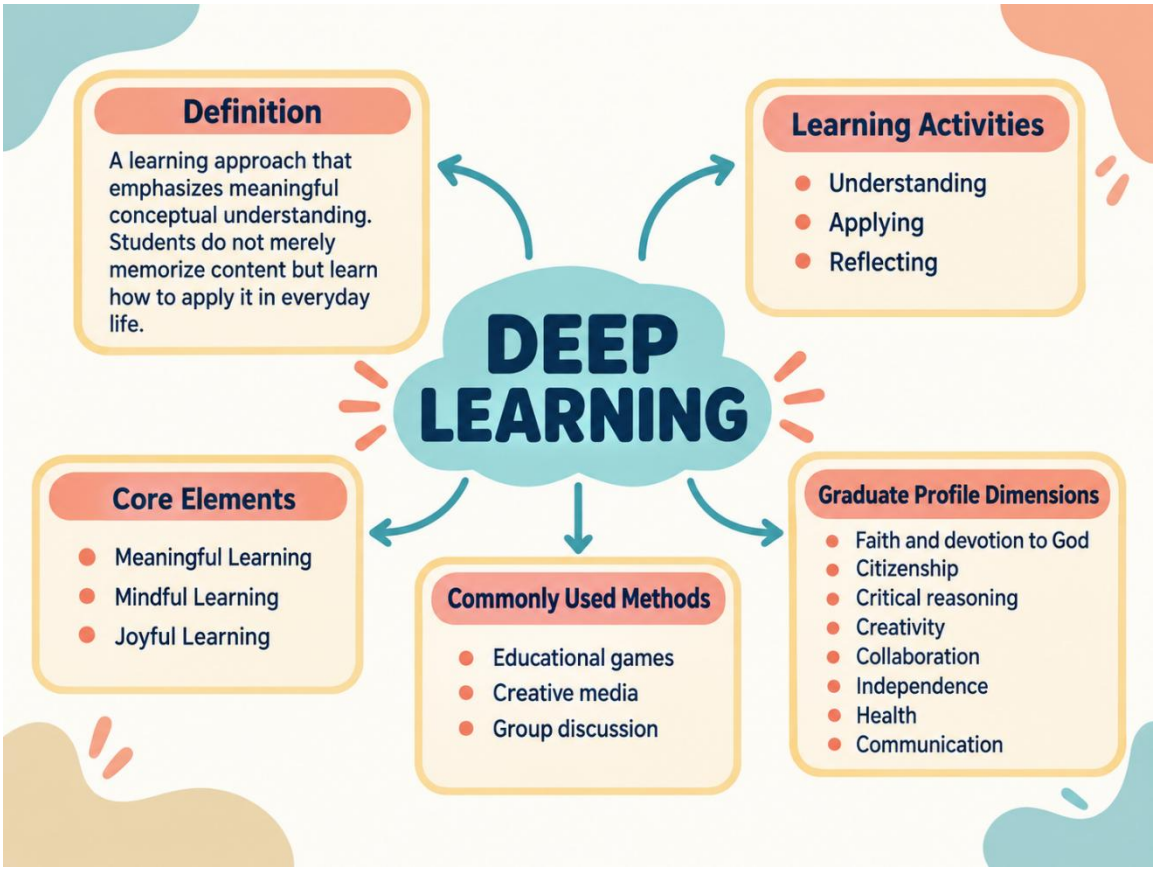


Figure 1. A Student-Produced Artifact Representing the Meaning of Deep Learning
Source: Student project collected during classroom observation and reproduced with permission.

Figure 1 is treated as documentary evidence of student meaning-making rather than as proof of religious-character transformation. It illustrates how students represented deep-learning principles through a project-based activity. The artifact also indicates that students associated deep learning with understanding concepts, applying knowledge, reflecting on experience, participating in collaborative discussion, and using creative learning media.

Students' experiences were not uniform. Project-based activities emphasized collaboration and investigation, reflective activities emphasized individual interpretation, and discussion-based lessons provided greater opportunities to articulate and negotiate meaning. Visible enthusiasm or participation did not in itself demonstrate deep conceptual understanding or religious-value internalization. An engaging activity could support joyful participation without necessarily generating reflection or meaningful application. Deep learning therefore depended on the quality and integration of the activities rather than simply on whether students appeared active or entertained.

Contextual Mechanisms of Religious Character Formation

The third finding showed that religious-character formation was understood as a gradual process connecting religious knowledge with reflection, personal meaning, social interaction, and everyday application. The data did not indicate that one activity produced an immediate change in character. Instead, teachers created pedagogical conditions in which students could examine Islamic values, relate them to contemporary situations, discuss their significance, and consider their application.

Reflection was one mechanism supporting this process. Reflective questions, self-assessment, and journaling encouraged students to examine the relationship between religious principles and their conduct. Contextualization was a second mechanism. Connecting Islamic teachings with digital ethics, social media, peer relationships, and everyday moral decisions enabled students to interpret the relevance of religious knowledge within their lived realities. Participatory and emotionally supportive interaction was a third mechanism. Discussion, storytelling, collaborative work, and problem solving allowed students to articulate ideas, encounter different perspectives, and explore possible applications of Islamic values.

The convergence of interviews, classroom observations, and lesson-planning documents supports the interpretation that these mechanisms operated through the combination of instructional intention and student participation. Teachers reported an intention to move beyond knowledge transmission, observations documented reflective and contextual activities, and instructional documents incorporated related learning objectives and tasks.

The evidence does not establish that deep-learning pedagogy alone caused religious-character transformation. School culture, leadership, curriculum coordination, teacher competence, peer interaction, family socialization, previous religious experience, and the wider digital environment may also influence how students interpret and internalize Islamic values. The data also did not demonstrate identical levels of internalization among all students. Differences in learning activities, teacher strategies, willingness to participate, and opportunities for reflection affected how the dimensions of deep learning were experienced.

The contribution of deep-learning pedagogy therefore lies primarily in creating conditions that may support internalization. Mindful learning provided opportunities for self-awareness and moral reflection. Meaningful learning connected Islamic knowledge with lived realities. Joyful learning supported active and emotionally positive participation. Their integration enabled students to move beyond receiving religious information toward interpreting, discussing, reflecting on, and considering the application of Islamic values.

Synthesis of the Findings

The relationships identified across the findings are summarized in Figure 2. The figure was reconstructed from the interview, observational, and documentary coding. It replaces the original unfiltered project map, which contained excessive nodes, overlapping connections, participant identifiers, and codes unrelated to the revised focus of the study.

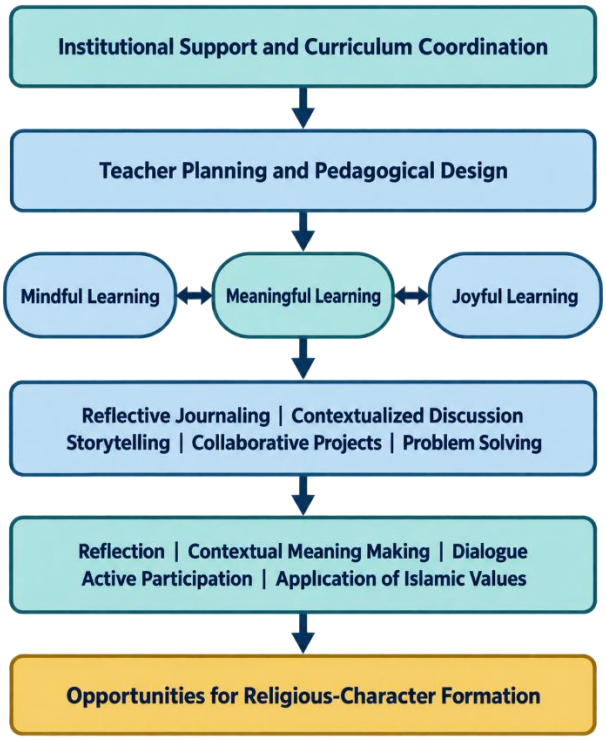


Figure 2. Pedagogical Pathway Connecting Deep-Learning Design with Opportunities for Religious-Character Formation

Source: Developed by the authors from interview, classroom observation, and documentary data.

Contextual influences surrounding the pathway include teacher capacity, school culture, peer interaction, family socialization, previous religious experience, and digital environments.

Figure 2 should not be interpreted as a linear causal model. The reciprocal relationships among mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning indicate that the three dimensions operated as mutually reinforcing aspects of instructional design. Student responses also informed teacher reflection and subsequent instructional planning. Religious-character formation is therefore positioned as a pedagogical opportunity emerging from the interaction of learning design, student engagement, and contextual conditions rather than as an automatic outcome.

Discussion

Interpretation of the Principal Findings

The findings demonstrate that deep-learning pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education operated as an integrated pedagogical orientation rather than as a single instructional method. Teachers combined mindful reflection, contextual meaning-making, and emotionally supportive participation through reflective journals, storytelling, collaborative discussion, project work, and problem-solving activities. This finding is consistent with Entwistle and Peterson's (2020) account of deep learning as engagement directed toward understanding, connection, reflection, and meaning rather than the reproduction of information.

The results also show that student-centred activities do not automatically generate deep learning. The observed activities differed in the extent to which they supported reflection, contextual understanding, and application. Games or collaborative activities could generate enjoyment and participation without necessarily producing conceptual or moral depth. This qualification is consistent with Baeten et al. (2010), who found that student-centred environments support deep approaches only when instructional tasks, assessment, teacher guidance, workload, and students' perceptions are constructively aligned.

The present study extends this understanding into Islamic Religious Education by showing that mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning acquire pedagogical significance through their integration rather than their isolated presence. Mindful learning without contextual relevance may become an abstract reflective exercise. Meaningful learning without reflection may be reduced to the use of familiar examples. Joyful learning without intellectual and moral engagement may become entertainment. Deep learning emerged when reflection, relevance, participation, and application were deliberately connected.

Reflection and Contextual Meaning Making

Reflection emerged as a central mechanism connecting religious knowledge with students' personal interpretations. Reflective questions, self-assessment, and journaling encouraged students to examine the significance of Islamic teachings for their intentions, attitudes, and behaviour. This process is compatible with Mezirow's (1997) account of transformative learning, which emphasizes critical reflection and the reinterpretation of experience.

The findings do not, however, demonstrate a complete or permanent transformation of students' perspectives. They show more cautiously that reflective practices created opportunities for students to reconsider how religious concepts related to their lives. A short-term qualitative case study cannot establish whether these interpretations became enduring dispositions. The term *religious-character formation* is therefore more appropriate than *religious-character transformation*.

Contextual meaning-making provided a second mechanism. Teachers connected Islamic teachings with digital ethics, social-media behaviour, peer relationships, and contemporary moral dilemmas. This enabled religious concepts to function as interpretive resources for lived experience rather than as abstract curricular material. Educational identity research similarly indicates that learning environments contribute to students' values, goals, social roles, and developing understandings of themselves (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Contextualized Islamic learning may therefore contribute to character formation when students can relate religious principles to the practical moral questions through which identity is negotiated.

Contextualization must involve more than mentioning contemporary examples. A lesson may refer to social media or peer relationships without requiring students to interpret competing values, consider consequences, or justify moral decisions. Deep contextual learning requires students to connect Islamic principles with experience through analysis, reflection, and reasoned application. The contribution of meaningful learning lies in this interpretive process rather than in the mere presence of familiar topics.

Emotional Safety Participation and Internalization

Joyful learning was expressed through positive participation, storytelling, discussion, games, and collaboration. Its analytical significance was not simply that students enjoyed classroom activities. An emotionally supportive environment enabled students to ask questions, express uncertainty, present interpretations, and interact with peers. Such conditions may be particularly important in religious education, where students may hesitate to discuss moral uncertainty or competing interpretations because they fear judgment.

The teacher's attempt to create a safe classroom environment can be interpreted through Self-Determination Theory. Deci and Ryan (1985) distinguish externally controlled behaviour from increasingly autonomous forms of motivation. Ryan and Deci (2020) further explain that environments supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitate internalization. In this study, opportunities to express opinions, connect content with personal experience, and participate in supportive interaction may have reduced students' dependence on externally imposed answers.

This evidence does not prove that religious values became fully internalized. It identifies pedagogical conditions under which students could take greater ownership of their understanding. Religious-character formation should consequently not be equated with visible compliance. Students may display expected behaviour because of teacher authority, school rules, peer expectations, or social desirability. Internalization requires religious values to become integrated with self-understanding and autonomous moral motivation.

Krettenauer (2022) conceptualizes moral identity as a developmental goal whose organization and motivational force change over time. The present findings support a gradual interpretation of religious-character formation in which reflection, contextual understanding, dialogue, and application create possibilities for internal commitment but do not guarantee it.

Cognitive Affective Social and Spiritual Dimensions

The findings indicate that deep learning in Islamic Religious Education involved cognitive, affective, social, and spiritual dimensions. Conceptual understanding was supported through questioning and problem solving. Affective engagement was encouraged through positive classroom experiences and perceived relevance. Social learning occurred through discussion, collaboration, teacher guidance, and peer interaction. Spiritual and moral engagement occurred when students examined their intentions, behaviour, and relationship with Islamic values.

This multidimensional pattern is consistent with moral-identity scholarship emphasizing that moral functioning involves interactions among cognition, self-understanding, emotion, social relationships, and opportunities for action (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009). It also clarifies the role of *adab*, *akhlaq*, and *tarbiyah* in the study. These concepts should not be presented merely as normative outcomes. They refer to educational processes through which knowledge, moral orientation, disciplined practice, interpersonal relationships, and spiritual purpose become integrated.

The study contributes to Islamic educational theory by proposing that pedagogical depth supports religious-character formation when learning connects

understanding with reflection, experience, interaction, and action. Its contribution lies not in claiming immediate behavioural transformation, but in identifying a pedagogical pathway through which students may move from receiving Islamic knowledge toward interpreting its meaning and considering its application.

Generation Z and Digital Religious Contexts

The inclusion of digital ethics and social-media use in classroom learning is particularly significant for Generation Z. Students encounter religious messages through multiple digital actors whose authority, credibility, and interpretations may differ. Prasetya et al. (2023) raise concerns about identity fragmentation and competing influences within social-media environments. Digital religion research similarly demonstrates that online practices influence religious authority, identity, community, and the relationship between online and offline religious life (Campbell, 2013).

The findings suggest that Islamic Religious Education can respond to these conditions by treating students' digital experiences as material for reflection and moral reasoning. Deep-learning pedagogy may help students evaluate religious claims, examine the ethical consequences of online behaviour, and connect digital participation with Islamic responsibilities. The purpose is not to portray digital environments exclusively as threats. Students require interpretive capacities that allow them to engage critically and responsibly with both the opportunities and risks of digital religious life.

This interpretation expands the role of Islamic Religious Education from transmitting established knowledge to supporting religious judgment in complex information environments. The available evidence nevertheless concerns classroom opportunities and participant interpretations. It does not establish long-term changes in students' online behaviour. Such claims would require longitudinal observation, repeated interviews, or evidence of students' digital practices beyond the classroom.

Pedagogical Ecology and Institutional Conditions

The findings demonstrate that deep-learning implementation depended on more than individual teacher creativity. Curriculum coordination, leadership support, instructional resources, professional development, classroom conditions, and student responsiveness shaped how the pedagogy was enacted. This supports an ecological interpretation in which teaching practices and student engagement are embedded in wider institutional and social conditions.

The same ecological reasoning applies to religious-character formation. Family socialization, peer relationships, school culture, previous religious experience, and digital environments may reinforce or contradict classroom learning. The classroom can create opportunities for internalization, but it cannot independently determine students' moral development. Figure 2 therefore includes contextual influences rather than presenting teacher action as a sufficient cause of character formation.

Institutional support is important because reflective and dialogic teaching requires time, pedagogical competence, suitable assessment, and a classroom culture that tolerates questions and uncertainty. Without these conditions, mindful

learning may become a superficial exercise, meaningful learning may be reduced to familiar examples, and joyful learning may be interpreted merely as entertainment.

Alternative Explanations

Several alternative explanations must be considered. Student engagement may have been influenced by teacher charisma, interpersonal warmth, or the novelty of the activities rather than by deep-learning design alone. A positive school climate may have supported participation independently of the observed pedagogical practices. Students may also have provided favourable interview responses because they wished to satisfy teachers or researchers.

Differences in prior religious knowledge, family religiosity, academic confidence, peer relationships, and willingness to speak may have affected how students responded to reflective and collaborative activities. Natural maturation and experiences outside school may also have contributed to changes in moral reasoning and self-regulation. The qualitative evidence cannot isolate the independent influence of classroom pedagogy from these factors.

Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents strengthens the plausibility of the identified mechanisms but does not establish causality. These alternative interpretations therefore refine rather than invalidate the principal finding. Deep-learning pedagogy created identifiable opportunities for reflection, contextual meaning-making, dialogue, and application, but the extent to which these opportunities produced sustained internalization depended on students' engagement and wider contextual influences.

Theoretical Contribution

The study offers a context-sensitive explanation of how deep-learning pedagogy may contribute to religious-character formation. Mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning were not separate instructional stages. They functioned as interdependent dimensions of a pedagogical process. Mindful learning supported awareness and reflection. Meaningful learning connected Islamic teachings with lived experience. Joyful learning provided emotional and relational conditions for participation and dialogue.

Their integration created opportunities for students to connect religious knowledge with moral self-understanding and everyday application. This interpretation refines approaches that define deep learning primarily in cognitive terms. Within Islamic Religious Education, pedagogical depth also includes affective engagement, spiritual reflection, social interaction, and moral agency.

The theoretical contribution is therefore expressed as a pedagogical pathway rather than as evidence of direct character transformation. Teacher planning and institutional support shape learning activities. These activities create opportunities for reflection, contextual meaning-making, dialogue, and application. These processes may contribute to religious-character formation when they interact with supportive personal, institutional, familial, and digital conditions.

Practical Implications

Teacher professional development should strengthen educators' ability to design reflective questions, contextual moral problems, dialogic classroom interaction, project-based learning, and assessments that capture interpretation

and application rather than recall alone. Teachers also require support in distinguishing meaningful joyful learning from activities that are merely entertaining.

Curriculum design should connect Islamic teachings with situations students encounter, including digital communication, peer pressure, religious information online, social relationships, and contemporary ethical dilemmas. Contextualization should require students to analyse, justify, reflect, and apply rather than simply recognize a familiar example.

Assessment may include reflective journals, reasoned responses to moral dilemmas, project work, self-assessment, and opportunities to explain how Islamic principles inform decisions. Such assessments cannot definitively measure internalized character, but they can provide evidence of students' reasoning, reflection, and capacity for contextual application.

Schools should provide institutional conditions supporting deep-learning pedagogy, including collaborative planning, instructional resources, professional learning, and sufficient time for reflection and discussion. Family engagement and digital literacy may also help connect classroom learning with the wider environments in which students negotiate religious values.

Limitations and Transferability

The single-case qualitative design limits statistical generalization. The findings describe patterns within a bounded educational context and should be transferred cautiously. The relatively short observation period does not establish whether students' reflective engagement or reported application of Islamic values persisted over time. Interview data may also be affected by social desirability because religious character is normatively valued.

The study relied on a limited range of direct student testimony. The teacher quotation, observations, documents, and student-produced artifact support the identified themes, but additional student quotations and longitudinal evidence would strengthen claims concerning students' interpretations and internalization. Researcher positionality may also have influenced observation, interviewing, coding, and interpretation.

Future research should examine deep-learning pedagogy across multiple educational settings and over longer periods. Longitudinal studies could investigate whether reflective and contextual learning is associated with sustained moral reasoning and self-regulation. Mixed-methods research could combine qualitative accounts with validated measures of learning approaches, autonomous motivation, moral identity, and classroom climate. Research on students' digital religious practices could further determine whether classroom learning affects how they evaluate and enact religious values online.

CONCLUSION

This study found that deep-learning pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education creates broader opportunities for religious-character formation among Generation Z students than conventional content-delivery approaches might suggest. The integration of mindful, meaningful, and joyful learning through reflective journaling,

contextualized discussion, storytelling, collaborative projects, and problem solving encouraged students to connect Islamic teachings with personal experience and everyday conduct. These findings challenge the longstanding assumption that religious character is formed primarily through doctrinal transmission, memorization, and behavioral regulation. Instead, character formation emerged as a pedagogically mediated process involving reflection, dialogue, active participation, contextual meaning making, and the practical application of Islamic values. Institutional support, curriculum coordination, and purposeful teacher planning were also essential in enabling this process.

Scientifically, this study reinforces previous findings that student-centered, reflective, contextual, and participatory learning can strengthen students' engagement with religious and moral values. At the same time, it questions the adequacy of instructional models that treat knowledge acquisition as sufficient evidence of character formation. The study contributes the concept of a pedagogical pathway connecting institutional conditions, teacher-designed learning experiences, student meaning making, and opportunities for religious-character formation. This framework enriches scholarly discussion by positioning deep-learning pedagogy not merely as an instructional approach for improving cognitive understanding, but as an educational process through which Generation Z students can interpret, negotiate, and enact Islamic values in contexts relevant to their lives.

The study is limited by its small participant group, its focus on a specific institutional case, and the absence of longitudinal evidence, which restrict the transferability of its findings and prevents claims of direct causal impact. The reported changes should therefore be understood as context-bound indications of opportunities for character formation rather than definitive proof of sustained transformation. Further research should involve larger and more diverse samples, multiple educational settings, and longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine how these pedagogical processes influence religious character over time. Islamic schools are also encouraged to strengthen teacher professional development, align curriculum and institutional support, incorporate structured reflective and collaborative activities, and develop assessment practices capable of documenting changes in students' moral reasoning and everyday enactment of Islamic values.

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