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Strategies of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Implementing a Love-Based Curriculum to Enhance Students' Religious Character

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Abstract	Religious character is a central outcome of Islamic Religious Education (IRE), yet its development cannot rely on cognitive transmission alone. Recently, love-based curriculum approaches have gained attention for repositioning learning around compassion, empathy, respect, human dignity, and constructive teacher–student relationships. This article aims to synthesize strategies that IRE teachers can employ when implementing a love-based curriculum to strengthen students' religious character. A qualitative literature review was conducted by examining recent scholarly studies on love-based Islamic education, Islamic character education, teacher–student relationships, religious habituation, active learning, and curriculum implementation. The literature was organized through thematic analysis to identify recurring pedagogical strategies and implementation conditions. The synthesis indicates five interconnected strategies: teachers' role modelling and relational care; explicit integration of love values into lesson planning and learning activities; dialogic, empathetic, and student-centred pedagogy; habituation through religious routines and school culture; and affective assessment combined with family and school-community collaboration. These strategies work most effectively when love is treated not as an additional classroom slogan but as a consistent pedagogical ethic that shapes curriculum objectives, interaction, discipline, assessment, and teacher professionalism. The article concludes that a love-based curriculum can strengthen religious character by connecting faith knowledge with lived ethical practice, emotional safety, responsibility, empathy, and social care.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) has a distinctive responsibility in schools because its educational purpose extends beyond the acquisition of religious concepts to the formation of students who embody faith, ethical conduct, and socially responsible behavior. Recent studies consistently describe religious character as an outcome of the interaction between religious knowledge, habituation, exemplary conduct, and the broader culture of the school rather than as a product of classroom explanation alone (Jauhari, 2022; Najmi et al., 2023; Arrosyid' & Nursikin, 2024). In this perspective, the IRE teacher is not merely a transmitter of Islamic information but also a moral educator whose daily conduct, communication, and pedagogical choices become part of the learning environment.

The need for such an orientation is increasingly evident in a context in which students encounter diverse social influences, intensive digital communication, and rapidly changing patterns of interaction. Character education therefore requires learning environments that connect values with students' lived experiences. Research on Islamic education shows that religious character is strengthened when religious learning is integrated with school routines, role modelling, reflection, and opportunities for students to practice values in concrete situations (Muhtarom et al., 2021; Mawardi et al., 2021). The



challenge is that values may remain declarative when they are listed in lesson plans but are not consistently translated into teaching methods, classroom relationships, and assessment practices.

A love-based curriculum offers a relevant response to this implementation gap. In this article, a love-based curriculum refers to a curricular orientation in which love (*mahabbah*), compassion, empathy, respect, care, human dignity, and responsibility are intentionally embedded in learning objectives, content, methods, interactions, and evaluation. Recent scholarship on the Love-Based Curriculum in Islamic education emphasizes that compassion and empathy should not be treated as supplementary themes but as principles for building Islamic and humanistic character (Aliyya et al., 2026). Studies of love-based curriculum management in madrasahs likewise show that implementation involves planning, classroom practice, school culture, and evaluation rather than a single instructional technique (Basori et al., 2025).

The relational dimension is particularly important. Evidence from Islamic primary schools indicates that the affective quality of student–teacher relationships is associated with students’ experience of the teacher and can be shaped by religious congruence and interpersonal interaction (Charki et al., 2022). More broadly, systematic research suggests that teacher empathy is relevant to the quality of teacher–student interactions, although the evidence is not uniformly strong across all student outcomes (Aldrup et al., 2022). These findings suggest that love-based pedagogy should be understood as a disciplined form of relational practice rather than permissiveness or the absence of academic and behavioral expectations.

At the curricular level, recent studies identify an important gap between the inclusion of character values in Islamic education documents and their enactment through interactive pedagogy and assessment. Alhamuddin and Arifin (2025) found that values such as honesty, responsibility, and respect can be present in curriculum materials while remaining insufficiently translated into interactive classroom practices. Similarly, critical policy analysis of Indonesian curricula highlights the continued importance of character formation within both the 2013 and Merdeka Curriculum frameworks (Alhamuddin, 2025). The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in Islamic education also provides opportunities for integrating character through student-centred, contextual, and project-oriented learning (Munzir & Widodo, 2023).

Against this background, the central question of this article is: what strategies can Islamic Religious Education teachers use to implement a love-based curriculum so that religious character becomes visible in students’ attitudes and everyday practices? The objective is to synthesize the pedagogical strategies most consistently supported in recent literature and to formulate an integrated implementation framework. The article contributes by connecting three strands that are often discussed separately: Islamic character education, teacher–student relational pedagogy, and love-based curriculum implementation. The resulting framework emphasizes that religious character is strengthened when love becomes a coherent principle linking teacher modelling, curriculum planning, classroom interaction, habituation, assessment, and collaboration.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative literature review with thematic synthesis. The review focused on scholarly publications addressing love-based curriculum, Islamic Religious Education, religious character, teacher strategies, teacher–student relationships, habituation, school culture, and character-oriented assessment. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2021 and 2026 so that the synthesis reflects recent developments in Islamic education and curriculum practice. The literature was identified through academic web searches and publisher or journal pages, and studies were selected when their abstracts or full texts directly addressed one or more of the article’s conceptual components. The analytical procedure consisted of four stages: identification of relevant studies, screening for topical relevance, extraction of findings concerning teacher strategies and implementation conditions, and thematic synthesis. The extracted evidence was grouped into recurring themes: teacher role modelling and relational care; curriculum and lesson-plan integration; empathetic and dialogic pedagogy; habituation and school culture; affective assessment and collaboration; and

implementation challenges. The approach is consistent with recent qualitative studies of Islamic character education that use observation, interviews, documentation, or literature analysis to understand how values become embodied in educational practice (Jauhari, 2022; Basri, 2024). Because the present article is a literature synthesis rather than a field study, no original participants or primary empirical data were involved, and the findings are presented as a conceptual synthesis rather than as claims about a single school.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Teachers as Role Models and Relational Figures

The first strategy is to position the IRE teacher as a consistent role model whose conduct communicates the meaning of love more powerfully than verbal instruction alone. Islamic character education literature repeatedly identifies exemplary behavior as a central mechanism through which students learn religious dispositions. Jauhari (2022) highlights habituation and exemplary conduct as important means of forming religious character, while Azizah and Anshori (2022) report that IRE teachers foster religious character through guidance, modelling, reminders, religious programs, and a supportive religious atmosphere. More recent research similarly emphasizes the role of teacher professionalism and motivation in encouraging students' spiritual development (Abdullah et al., 2024).

Within a love-based curriculum, modelling should include patience in responding to mistakes, fairness in discipline, respectful language, willingness to listen, and sensitivity to students' individual circumstances. Such conduct makes the curriculum visible in the teacher's behavior. The teacher demonstrates that Islamic values are not merely rules applied to students but ethical commitments that also govern the adult's conduct. This is especially important because students can experience contradictions when teachers teach compassion while interacting through humiliation, excessive punishment, or unequal treatment. Habib et al. (2026) argue that the transition toward love-based Islamic education requires teachers to internalize **mahabbah** in daily interaction and to reduce subtle forms of symbolic violence.

The relational component also has a psychological foundation. Teacher–student relationships characterized by emotional closeness, interest, and responsiveness can create conditions conducive to engagement and learning (Charki et al., 2022). In Islamic primary schools, affective student–teacher relationships are also shaped by the perceived religious relationship between teachers and students (Charki et al., 2022). Therefore, the teacher's strategy is not simply to be friendly but to construct a relationship in which students feel respected while still receiving clear expectations. Love becomes pedagogically productive when it combines warmth with moral direction.

3.2. Integrating Love Values into Curriculum Planning and Learning Objectives

The second strategy is curricular integration. Love-based education becomes sustainable when values such as compassion, respect, empathy, forgiveness, responsibility, tolerance, and social care are explicitly connected to learning outcomes. The curriculum should therefore specify not only what students should know about Islamic teachings but also how they should demonstrate the ethical meaning of those teachings in relationships and everyday decisions. Basori et al. (2025) show that love-based curriculum management requires systematic planning and implementation, while Aliyya et al. (2026) frame the Love-Based Curriculum as a paradigm for developing Islamic and humanistic character.

In practical terms, an IRE teacher can revise lesson objectives so that each major topic contains a knowledge objective, a value objective, and a behavioral application. A lesson on **akhlak**, for example, may require students to explain a concept, interpret a relevant Qur'anic or Prophetic teaching, and then demonstrate the value through a collaborative task or reflective action. A lesson on worship can similarly connect ritual knowledge with humility, discipline, gratitude, and concern for others. This approach prevents character education from being separated from subject content.

The strategy also fits developments in the Merdeka Curriculum. Munzir and Widodo (2023) emphasize the role of Islamic Religious Education in shaping student character within the Merdeka

framework, while Alhamuddin and Arifin (2025) identify the continuing challenge of translating curricular values into interactive teaching and assessment. Thus, teachers need to move from a document-centred approach to an enactment-centred approach: every value written in the curriculum should have a corresponding learning experience through which students can understand, practice, discuss, and reflect on it.

3.3. Empathetic, Dialogic, and Student-Centred Pedagogy

The third strategy is to use empathetic and dialogic pedagogy. Love-based curriculum implementation requires teachers to listen to students, invite questions, acknowledge different experiences, and provide opportunities for students to express moral reasoning. Such practices are important because religious character develops through interpretation and practice, not through one-way transmission. Active learning has been found to increase student participation and create opportunities for moral reflection in Islamic Religious Education (Rahmatika et al., 2024). Research on teacher–student communication in IRE also identifies openness, empathy, praise, encouragement, positive attitudes, and equal participation as pathways to a safer and more dialogic classroom (Rahmatika et al., 2024).

Empathy, however, should be applied critically. Aldrup et al. (2022) found that although teacher empathy is theoretically promising for high-quality interactions, empirical associations with general instructional and student outcomes are not uniformly consistent. The implication is that empathy should be combined with pedagogical competence, clear expectations, and structured learning activities. A love-based teacher does not remove standards; instead, the teacher explains standards in ways that preserve student dignity and provides corrective feedback without degrading the learner.

Dialogic learning can take several forms: reflective questioning, case discussions, peer collaboration, role play, moral dilemma analysis, service-learning, and student reflection journals. These activities allow students to translate Islamic principles into decisions about friendship, honesty, digital behavior, respect for difference, environmental responsibility, and social care. The strategy is consistent with research showing that Islamic character formation is strengthened when religious values are integrated into actual learning experiences and school culture rather than taught only as abstract content (Maslani et al., 2023; Najmi et al., 2023).

3.4. Habituation, Religious Routines, and School Culture

The fourth strategy is habituation. Religious character requires repeated opportunities for students to enact values until the values become part of everyday conduct. Recent studies of Islamic Religious Education describe habituation through prayer, Qur'an reading, courteous behavior, religious reflection, and other school routines as a practical pathway for internalizing religious values (Jauhari, 2022; Arrosyid' & Nursikin, 2024). The key principle for a love-based curriculum is that habituation should be experienced as meaningful practice rather than mechanical compliance.

For this reason, teachers should connect routines to their ethical purpose. Congregational prayer can be linked with discipline, equality, humility, and togetherness; Qur'an reading can be connected with reflection and ethical action; greetings and respectful speech can be connected with recognition of human dignity; and community service can be connected with gratitude and social responsibility. When routines are explained and reflected upon, students are more likely to understand why the practice matters.

School culture is equally important. Religious character cannot be assigned entirely to the IRE teacher because students encounter messages from principals, classroom teachers, peers, extracurricular activities, and families. Research on Islamic character education and school-based religious programs shows that consistency across these environments strengthens internalization (Muhtarom et al., 2021; Akhyar et al., 2024). Therefore, love-based implementation should be school-wide, with the IRE teacher functioning as a coordinator and model who helps connect classroom learning to the wider culture.

3.5. Affective Assessment, Reflection, and Feedback

The fifth strategy is to strengthen assessment of affective and behavioral development. A major

weakness in character education is the tendency to assess what students can explain while giving less systematic attention to how they behave, relate to others, and reflect on their actions. Recent conceptual work on affective assessment in love-based PAI argues that religious character requires assessment approaches capable of recognizing emotional and behavioral dimensions rather than relying predominantly on cognitive tests (Alfiansyah et al., 2026).

Affective assessment can include teacher observation, student self-reflection, peer feedback, learning journals, portfolios, project reflection, and structured behavior indicators. The purpose is not to label students as religious or non-religious, but to provide developmental feedback. For example, an observation rubric may track respectful communication, honesty in group work, responsibility for tasks, willingness to help peers, discipline in worship routines, and ability to respond constructively to disagreement. Assessment results should then inform supportive conversations and improvement plans.

This approach also reinforces the meaning of love in pedagogy. Feedback becomes an act of care when it identifies what needs to improve while preserving the learner's dignity. Character assessment should therefore avoid public humiliation, stigmatization, and simplistic moral judgments. Instead, it should help students understand the distance between values they know and values they practice. In this way, assessment becomes part of the process of moral growth.

3.6. Collaboration, Digital Context, and Implementation Challenges

The sixth strategy is collaboration. Religious character is shaped by repeated interactions across school and home, so teachers need communication with parents, school leaders, and relevant community actors. Research on current Islamic education highlights the importance of collaboration and school culture in maintaining religious character amid social and digital change. Teachers can communicate character goals to parents, design shared home-school activities, and use digital platforms to provide reflective religious content rather than merely additional worksheets. The objective is to create consistency between the values students hear and the relationships they experience.

Digital culture creates both opportunities and risks. Students can access diverse religious information, participate in online communities, and use digital media for learning, but they may also encounter hostile communication, misinformation, intolerance, and performative religiosity. A love-based IRE curriculum should therefore include digital ethics: respectful disagreement, verification of religious information, responsible sharing, empathy toward people with different views, and awareness of the consequences of online speech. This expands religious character from classroom behavior to digital citizenship.

The literature also points to implementation challenges. Alhamuddin and Arifin (2025) identify the gap between value inclusion and classroom enactment; Basri (2024) notes that character education remains difficult to implement consistently within PAI curricula; and Mawardi et al. (2021) show that teachers face practical challenges in strengthening Islamic character under changing learning conditions. Teacher readiness is therefore a central condition. Habib et al. (2026) specifically emphasize that love-based education requires teachers to internalize the approach rather than simply adopt its terminology. Professional development should consequently cover relational communication, restorative discipline, reflective pedagogy, affective assessment, inclusive classroom management, and the theological foundations of *mahabbah*.

Taken together, the literature supports an integrated implementation model. The model begins with teacher disposition and role modelling, continues through curriculum planning and empathetic classroom pedagogy, becomes visible through habituation and school culture, and is reinforced through affective assessment and collaboration. None of these elements is sufficient in isolation. A school may have religious routines without relational warmth, or a caring teacher without systematic character assessment. The distinctive contribution of a love-based curriculum lies in connecting these elements under a coherent ethical principle: students are guided toward religious commitment through relationships and learning experiences that affirm dignity, responsibility, compassion, and moral agency.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature-based study concludes that Islamic Religious Education teachers can implement a love-based curriculum through an integrated set of strategies rather than through a single instructional method. The most important strategies are consistent teacher role modelling and relational care; explicit integration of love and character values into curriculum objectives and lesson design; empathetic, dialogic, and student-centred learning; meaningful habituation through religious routines and school culture; affective assessment and developmental feedback; and collaboration with families and the wider school community. The synthesis indicates that love-based education should not be interpreted as reducing discipline or academic standards. Instead, it redefines the way standards are communicated and enacted so that correction, assessment, and classroom management remain consistent with dignity and compassion. The approach is particularly relevant to Islamic education because *mahabbah* can connect religious knowledge with lived moral practice, enabling students to experience faith as a source of responsibility, empathy, respect, and social care. Future research should test the proposed strategy framework through multi-site empirical studies, develop validated indicators for love-based religious character, and examine how the approach operates across different school levels and cultural contexts.

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