



Religious Activities and the Construction of Religious Character Among Children with Special Needs in Inclusive Schools in Palembang

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Abstract

Inclusive education seeks not only to ensure equal access to education but also to foster the holistic development of children with special needs, including their religious character. However, limited adaptive educational strategies and the absence of systematic frameworks for integrating religious activities into inclusive learning environments continue to challenge the effectiveness of religious character education. This study aims to examine the construction of religious activities, explore their implementation, and analyze their contributions to the development of religious character among children with special needs in inclusive schools in Palembang, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative multiple-case study design, the research was conducted at SD Negeri 30 Palembang and SMP Negeri 13 Palembang. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, questionnaires, and document analysis involving school principals, teachers, special education teachers, parents, and children with special needs. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, while trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation and member checking. The findings reveal that religious activities are systematically constructed through students' needs assessment, adaptive learning objectives, contextual religious content, differentiated instructional strategies, and collaborative partnerships among schools and families. Their implementation is strengthened through habituation, teacher role modelling, individualized mentoring, and inclusive school culture. These practices contribute significantly to the development of worship habits, spiritual awareness, discipline, responsibility, empathy, respect, and positive social interaction among children with special needs. The study concludes that religious activities constitute an adaptive and sustainable educational framework for fostering religious character within inclusive schools. The findings advance inclusive religious education by providing a contextual model for integrating religious values into the character development of children with special needs.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has become one of the most significant educational reforms worldwide, emphasizing equal educational opportunities for all learners regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or developmental conditions (Abas Hidayat et al., 2021). Rather than merely providing access to schooling, inclusive education seeks to establish learning environments where every student can participate meaningfully in academic, social, and moral development. In Indonesia, this commitment is reflected in the implementation of inclusive schools that accommodate children with special needs (CSNs) alongside their typically developing peers. Nevertheless, the expansion of inclusive education has also exposed numerous challenges, particularly regarding the development of students' religious and moral character (West et al., 1993). Although inclusive schools have increasingly focused on academic achievement and social participation, the cultivation of religious character among children with special needs has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This issue becomes increasingly important because children with special needs are frequently confronted with discrimination, social exclusion, and bullying, all of which negatively influence their psychological well-being and opportunities for positive character development (Efendi & Widiyono, 2025; Hidayati & Idhartono, 2024). The increasing number of children with special needs enrolled in inclusive schools in Palembang further highlights the urgency of developing educational strategies that support not only academic inclusion but also moral and spiritual development.

Religious character education occupies a strategic position within Indonesian education because it is expected to cultivate honesty, responsibility, empathy, discipline, tolerance, and respect through continuous habituation and meaningful learning experiences. Religious character is not merely reflected in ritual observance but also in social behavior, ethical decision-making, and interpersonal relationships (Irpan & Sain, 2024). Consequently, educational institutions are encouraged to integrate religious values into everyday school culture through structured religious activities such as collective prayer, Qur'anic recitation, Islamic celebrations, remembrance of God (dhikr), and other faith-based practices (Niskaromah et al., 2025). Such activities provide practical opportunities for students to internalize religious values beyond classroom instruction. However, children with special needs often require adaptive approaches because they experience diverse cognitive, emotional, communicative, and behavioral characteristics that influence how religious values are understood and practiced. Therefore, religious activities within inclusive schools should not simply replicate programs designed for regular students but instead be reconstructed according to the individual needs, learning capacities, and developmental characteristics of children with special needs (Kurniawati et al., 2026; Wijaya et al., 2025).

The rationale for examining religious activities in inclusive schools lies in the recognition that religious character develops through sustained interaction between individuals and their educational environment. Character formation cannot be achieved solely through formal religious instruction because religious values become meaningful only when they are continuously practiced in authentic social contexts (Supriatna, 2025). For children with special needs, this process requires systematic habituation, teacher role modeling, differentiated instruction, collaborative mentoring, and active parental involvement. Teachers play an essential role in translating abstract religious concepts into concrete experiences that can be understood according to students' developmental capacities (Abdullah et al., 2024). Likewise, school culture significantly influences how religious values are practiced, reinforced, and sustained over time. Consequently, understanding how religious activities are systematically organized and implemented provides valuable insights into effective strategies for fostering religious character among children with special needs within inclusive educational settings.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that religious education contributes positively to the character development of students with special needs. Albana et al. reported that Islamic religious education effectively supports character formation among students with behavioral disabilities when instructional approaches are adapted to learners' psychological characteristics (Albana et al., 2023). Similarly, Assiddiqi found that implementing Islamic education within the Merdeka Curriculum requires instructional flexibility without reducing educational quality (Assiddiqi, 2025). Ni'mah et al. emphasized that collaboration among Islamic education teachers, special education teachers, school administrators, and parents enhances inclusive religious learning

(Ni'mah & Mustofa, 2024). Collectively, these studies confirm that religious education possesses substantial potential for promoting positive character formation within inclusive educational contexts.

Beyond studies focusing specifically on religious education, broader research concerning inclusive education has identified numerous institutional and pedagogical challenges. Several scholars have reported that teacher competence in special education remains inadequate, while shortages of special education assistants, limited instructional resources, insufficient facilities, and persistent social stigma continue to hinder effective implementation of inclusive education (Hanifah et al., 2021; F. N. Hasanah & Zailani, 2025). Other studies have highlighted difficulties associated with curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, communication with children exhibiting diverse disabilities, and collaboration among teachers, parents, communities, and government agencies (Murawski & Spencer, 2011). These findings indicate that although inclusive education has become an important educational policy, many schools continue to struggle in creating educational environments that comprehensively address the academic, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of children with special needs.

Although previous research has significantly advanced understanding of inclusive education and religious instruction, several important research gaps remain. First, most existing studies investigate religious education, inclusive learning strategies, or character education independently rather than examining how religious activities are systematically constructed as an integrated framework for religious character development. Second, prior research has largely concentrated on classroom instruction, teacher competence, or curriculum implementation, while relatively little attention has been devoted to the broader organizational processes through which religious activities become embedded within inclusive school culture. Third, existing studies rarely explain how habituation, role modeling, differentiated instruction, parental participation, collaborative support, and school leadership interact to facilitate sustainable religious character formation among children with special needs. Fourth, empirical evidence concerning inclusive schools in Palembang remains limited despite the city's increasing commitment to inclusive education and its substantial population of children with special needs. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how religious activities can be systematically designed and implemented to accommodate the diverse characteristics of children with special needs while simultaneously fostering meaningful religious character development.

Addressing these gaps is academically and practically important because religious character formation among children with special needs cannot rely exclusively on formal religious instruction. Instead, it requires an integrated educational framework in which religious values are continuously reinforced through daily school experiences, adaptive learning strategies, and collaborative educational practices. Such an approach extends beyond ritual performance by encouraging the development of empathy, honesty, discipline, responsibility, respect, and spiritual awareness through sustained interaction among students, teachers, parents, and the wider school community. Furthermore, constructing an adaptive framework of religious activities contributes to both inclusive education and religious character education by providing practical guidance for schools seeking to strengthen moral development without neglecting individual differences among learners. This perspective also supports the broader objective of inclusive education, namely ensuring that every learner receives equitable opportunities to achieve academic success while developing positive moral and spiritual values within supportive educational environments.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to examine the construction of religious activities for developing religious character among children with special needs in inclusive schools in Palembang, Indonesia. Specifically, the study seeks to analyze the construction of religious activity content, explore the implementation strategies adopted by inclusive schools, and identify the characteristics of religious character emerging from these activities. By integrating perspectives from religious education, inclusive education, and character education, this study is expected to contribute a contextual framework for understanding how adaptive religious activities can effectively support the religious character development of children with special needs. Moreover, the findings are expected to enrich the growing body of literature on inclusive education while providing practical recommendations for teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and parents seeking to

establish more inclusive, religiously responsive, and character-oriented educational environments in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore the construction of religious character among children with special needs through religious activities in inclusive schools. A qualitative design was selected because the study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, interactions, and educational practices in their natural settings, rather than to measure variables statistically. The case study approach enabled an intensive examination of how religious activities were planned, implemented, and internalized in inclusive educational environments while considering the unique social and institutional contexts of each school (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2011).

The research was conducted at SD Negeri 30 Palembang and SMP Negeri 13 Palembang, two public inclusive schools recognized for implementing religious activities involving both regular students and children with special needs. These schools were purposively selected because they have established inclusive education programs, accommodate students with various disabilities, and consistently integrate religious activities into daily school routines. Although the schools serve children with various disabilities, this study focused specifically on students with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities, as they actively participate in religious activities and can communicate their learning experiences with appropriate support. The selection of these participants allowed the researcher to investigate how religious values are internalized through adaptive educational practices within inclusive school settings.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in implementing and experiencing religious activities in inclusive education. The participants consisted of school principals, Islamic Religious Education teachers, classroom teachers, special education teachers, parents, and students with special needs. This diversity of participants enabled the researcher to obtain comprehensive perspectives regarding the planning, implementation, supervision, and outcomes of religious character development. The inclusion of multiple stakeholders also strengthened the credibility of the findings by allowing data triangulation across different educational actors (Patton, 2014).

Data were collected using multiple qualitative techniques, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, questionnaires, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perceptions concerning the objectives, implementation strategies, challenges, and impacts of religious activities in developing students' religious character. Participant observations enabled the researcher to directly examine students' participation in daily religious practices, teacher-student interactions, and the implementation of school religious programs. Document analysis included school policies, religious activity schedules, lesson plans, students' records, photographs, and institutional documents supporting inclusive education. Questionnaires were used as supplementary instruments to gather additional information from teachers and parents regarding students' religious behaviors and character development. The combination of these techniques allowed a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon while minimizing methodological bias (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data condensation, interview transcripts, observation notes, questionnaire responses, and documentary evidence were carefully reviewed, coded, categorized, and organized according to emerging themes related to religious activities and religious character development. Subsequently, the organized data were presented in thematic matrices and descriptive narratives to facilitate interpretation and comparison across participants and research sites. Finally, conclusions were continuously verified through repeated examination of the empirical evidence until consistent patterns and meaningful interpretations were established. This iterative analytical process enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of how religious activities contribute to the construction of religious character among children with special needs within inclusive schools.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed several strategies for establishing research rigor, including source triangulation, method triangulation, prolonged engagement, member checking, and peer debriefing. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from principals, teachers, parents, and students, whereas method triangulation involved comparing findings derived from interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documentary evidence. Member checking was performed by returning interview summaries to selected participants for confirmation and clarification, ensuring that interpretations accurately reflected their perspectives. In addition, prolonged engagement in the research setting enabled the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of participants' behaviors and school culture while minimizing researcher bias. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research findings in accordance with established qualitative research standards. (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the participating schools before data collection commenced. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate after receiving explanations of the study's purpose, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. To protect participants' privacy, all personal identities were anonymized during data analysis and reporting. Given that the study involved children with special needs, additional attention was devoted to ensuring that interviews and observations were conducted respectfully and used communication strategies appropriate to participants' cognitive and emotional characteristics. These ethical procedures ensured that the research complied with accepted standards for qualitative educational research while safeguarding participants' dignity and well-being.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Construction of Religious Activities for Religious Character Development among Children with Special Needs

The findings indicate that the construction of religious activities in inclusive schools in Palembang is not merely intended to facilitate students' participation in religious rituals but represents a systematic educational framework for developing religious character among children with special needs (Azwar, 2023). Unlike conventional religious instruction that primarily emphasizes the acquisition of religious knowledge, the construction implemented at SD Negeri 30 Palembang and SMP Negeri 13 Palembang integrates spiritual, moral, social, and behavioral dimensions into everyday educational practices. The schools conceptualize religious activities as an integral component of school culture, enabling students to internalize Islamic values through continuous participation, repeated practice, and adaptive educational experiences. This construction reflects the understanding that character formation is a long-term educational process requiring consistency, collaboration, and contextual adaptation rather than isolated instructional interventions (Damayanti & Irniasari, 2020).

The first dimension identified in this study concerns the systematic analysis of students' characteristics before designing religious programs. Teachers acknowledged that children with special needs possess diverse intellectual abilities, communication skills, emotional characteristics, and adaptive behaviors that require individualized educational planning. Consequently, religious activities are developed only after teachers identify students' learning capacities through classroom observations, communication with parents, assessment reports, and collaboration with special education teachers (Wardhani & Khadavi, 2025). This preliminary assessment enables teachers to determine the appropriate learning objectives, instructional approaches, and religious activities suitable for each learner. Rather than categorizing students according to their disabilities alone, the schools prioritize students' functional abilities and developmental potential, thereby ensuring that every child can meaningfully participate in religious activities according to their individual capacities. Such findings reinforce the principle of inclusive education that emphasizes educational equity through differentiated support rather than uniform instructional practices (Herawati, 2014).

Another important finding relates to the educational objectives underlying the construction of religious activities. The schools do not define successful religious education solely in terms of

students' mastery of religious knowledge or memorization of Islamic teachings. Instead, teachers consistently emphasize cultivating religious character as the primary educational objective (Lindner & Schwab, 2025). This objective is reflected in efforts to nurture honesty, discipline, responsibility, empathy, respect, cooperation, gratitude, and spiritual awareness through everyday religious practices (Kurdi, 2024). Participants explained that children with special needs often have difficulty understanding abstract theological concepts; therefore, educational success is measured by observable behavioral changes rather than cognitive achievement alone. This orientation demonstrates that religious character education in inclusive schools prioritizes behavioral transformation through continuous practice rather than merely transmitting doctrinal knowledge, supporting previous arguments that character education is most effective when values are translated into habitual actions (Hasan, 2025; Zaedi, 2019).

The findings further reveal that the construction of religious content emphasizes practical religious experiences closely related to students' daily lives. Religious activities include collective prayer before and after classroom instruction, Duha prayer, Qur'anic recitation, Islamic greetings, remembrance of God (dhikr), commemoration of Islamic holy days, and various moral practices encouraging honesty, responsibility, mutual respect, and social care (Amirudin et al., 2025). Rather than presenting complex theological discussions, teachers intentionally simplify religious materials into concrete actions that children can imitate and repeatedly practice. Students demonstrating stronger cognitive abilities are encouraged to memorize short Qur'anic chapters and daily prayers, whereas those with greater intellectual limitations participate by observing, imitating, using visual prompts, and engaging in guided practice. Such differentiation illustrates that inclusive religious education values meaningful participation more than standardized performance, enabling every learner to experience spiritual growth according to his or her developmental capacity (Kamali, 2020).

The organization of religious activities also reflects a strong commitment to integrating religious values into the school's overall culture rather than restricting them to Islamic Religious Education classes. Teachers explained that religious values are consistently reinforced throughout the school day by encouraging students to greet one another politely, maintain cleanliness, demonstrate respect toward teachers and peers, participate in collective worship, and practice helping behaviors during classroom and extracurricular activities (Choi et al., 2017; Putra & Yanto, 2025). Consequently, religious activities serve as educational tools that shape students' social interactions while strengthening their spiritual awareness. This finding supports the view that school culture constitutes one of the most influential environments for developing children's moral and religious character because values become internalized through continuous social interaction and institutional practice rather than through formal instruction alone (Rasyid et al., 2024).

Another significant finding concerns the pedagogical strategies employed to transform religious activities into meaningful character-building experiences. The participating schools consistently adopted habituation, role modelling, individualized guidance, and differentiated instruction as the primary instructional approaches (Komariah & Nihayah, 2023). Among these, habituation emerged as the most dominant strategy because children with special needs generally develop behavioral patterns more effectively through repetitive practice than through abstract explanation (Saada & Magadlah, 2021). Daily routines such as reciting prayers before and after lessons, performing the Duha prayer, greeting teachers and classmates, reading short verses from the Qur'an, and maintaining cleanliness were practiced repeatedly until they gradually became part of students' everyday behavior. Teachers emphasized that religious character could not be established through occasional religious events but required continuous reinforcement embedded within students' daily educational experiences. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that repeated religious practices significantly contribute to the internalization of moral and spiritual values among children with special needs (Komalasari & Yakubu, 2023).

Role modelling also played a central role in the construction of religious activities. Teachers recognized that children with special needs tend to imitate observable behaviors more readily than they comprehend verbal instruction. Consequently, educators deliberately demonstrated desirable religious behaviors, including praying punctually, speaking politely, showing patience, respecting others, maintaining honesty, and demonstrating compassion during classroom interactions (Djazilan & Hariani, 2022). Rather than functioning solely as instructors, teachers positioned themselves as

living examples of religious values. Participants consistently explained that students were more likely to reproduce positive behaviors after repeatedly observing teachers' actions within authentic educational situations. This finding reinforces the argument that character education becomes more effective when moral values are demonstrated through daily interactions rather than delivered exclusively through classroom instruction (Nasucha et al., 2023).

The findings further demonstrate that differentiated instruction is another essential component of the construction of religious activity. Because students possess diverse intellectual and adaptive abilities, teachers continuously modify instructional methods, learning materials, communication styles, and educational expectations to meet individual needs. Students with stronger communication skills were encouraged to memorize short prayers, participate in Qur'anic recitation, and lead simple religious activities, whereas students requiring greater educational support engaged through visual demonstrations, repeated imitation, simplified language, and one-to-one assistance (Mulyana, 2023). Teachers reported that flexibility in instructional delivery was essential to ensuring that every student could participate meaningfully without experiencing excessive academic or emotional pressure. Such adaptive practices illustrate that inclusive religious education prioritizes equitable participation rather than uniform educational outcomes, thereby reflecting the fundamental philosophy of inclusive schooling (Muzakki & Nurdin, 2022).

Another important aspect identified in this study is the collaborative partnership established among teachers, school leaders, parents, and special education personnel. Religious character development was understood as a shared educational responsibility extending beyond the classroom. Parents were encouraged to reinforce religious habits at home by maintaining prayer routines, encouraging respectful communication, and supporting children's participation in religious activities. Regular communication between schools and families enabled teachers to monitor students' behavioral development and to ensure consistency between school-based and home-based religious practices. School principals coordinated institutional support for religious programs, whereas classroom teachers and special education teachers collaborated to adapt learning activities according to students' individual needs. This collaborative approach demonstrates that religious character develops most effectively when educational values are consistently reinforced across multiple learning environments, including school, family, and community (Irpan & Sain, 2024).

The study also found that the evaluation of religious character extended beyond formal academic assessment. Teachers primarily assessed students through continuous observation of behavioral changes occurring during classroom activities, religious programs, and daily social interactions (Chater, 1996). Indicators of successful character development included students' willingness to participate in collective worship, increased independence in performing religious practices, respectful interactions with peers and teachers, improved responsibility, honesty, empathy, and greater consistency in applying religious values within everyday situations (Latif, 2019). Participants emphasized that the purpose of evaluation was not to compare students' religious achievement but to identify individual progress according to each child's developmental potential. Such an assessment approach aligns with the principles of inclusive education by recognizing that meaningful educational success should be measured through personal growth rather than standardized performance.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the construction of religious activities in inclusive schools in Palembang constitutes a comprehensive educational framework that integrates individualized planning, adaptive pedagogy, collaborative partnerships, and continuous behavioral reinforcement. Religious character is not constructed through isolated instructional sessions but through sustained participation in religious experiences embedded within everyday school life. The interaction among habituation, role modelling, differentiated instruction, parental involvement, and supportive school culture creates an inclusive learning environment in which children with special needs can gradually internalize religious values according to their individual capacities. These findings extend previous studies that primarily focused on religious instruction or teacher competence by demonstrating that religious character development is fundamentally a systemic and collaborative process. The construction identified in this study, therefore, contributes to a contextual understanding of how inclusive schools can transform religious activities into sustainable mechanisms for fostering religious character while simultaneously strengthening students' social, moral, and spiritual development. Such evidence highlights that successful religious character

education depends not only on the quality of religious instruction but also on the integration of adaptive educational practices within the broader culture of inclusive schools.

Implementation of Religious Activities in Inclusive Schools

The implementation of religious activities in inclusive schools in Palembang demonstrates that religious character development is achieved through a systematic process integrating adaptive pedagogy, continuous habituation, and collaborative educational practices. Rather than treating religious activities as supplementary programs, both SD Negeri 30 Palembang and SMP Negeri 13 Palembang incorporate religious practices into the schools' daily routines, allowing children with special needs to participate alongside their peers in an inclusive educational environment. The findings indicate that successful implementation depends not only on the availability of religious programs but also on the schools' ability to adapt instructional practices according to students' diverse cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics. Consequently, implementation is a dynamic process that requires flexibility, consistency, and sustained educational commitment (Romadhoni et al., 2023; Salim et al., 2022).

Daily religious routines constitute the foundation of implementation. Every school day begins and ends with collective prayer, creating a structured spiritual atmosphere that encourages students to develop religious awareness from the moment they enter the classroom. In addition, students participate in Qur'anic recitation, Duha prayer, remembrance of God (*dhikr*), and Islamic greetings as integral components of their daily educational experiences. These activities are conducted repeatedly and consistently, enabling children with special needs to gradually internalize religious practices through habituation. Teachers explained that repeated participation is more effective than one-time instruction because many children with special needs require continuous exposure before religious behaviors become established as everyday habits. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that habitual religious practice serves as an effective strategy for strengthening religious character among students with diverse learning needs (Pentianasari et al., 2022; Rasyid et al., 2024).

The implementation process is characterized by differentiated instructional practices that recognize the unique abilities of individual students. Teachers do not require every child to perform identical religious activities at the same level of competence. Instead, educational expectations are adjusted according to students' intellectual functioning, communication abilities, emotional readiness, and adaptive behavior. Students demonstrating greater independence are encouraged to participate actively in congregational prayer, Qur'anic memorization, and classroom religious discussions, while those requiring additional support receive individualized guidance through simplified language, visual demonstrations, repeated practice, and direct teacher assistance. Such flexibility ensures that every learner experiences meaningful participation regardless of disability category or developmental level. This adaptive approach reflects the fundamental philosophy of inclusive education, which emphasizes equitable participation rather than uniform academic achievement (Kasman, 2020; Ni'mah et al., 2024).

Another prominent finding concerns the central role of teachers throughout the implementation process. Teachers function not only as instructors but also as facilitators, mentors, motivators, and role models who continuously reinforce religious values during classroom interactions and extracurricular activities. Participants consistently emphasized that children with special needs respond more positively to direct demonstration than to verbal explanation alone. Therefore, teachers intentionally model appropriate religious behaviors, including praying punctually, greeting respectfully, demonstrating patience, maintaining honesty, and helping others. Through continuous observation of teachers' behavior, students gradually imitate these actions and integrate them into their own daily routines. This illustrates that effective implementation relies heavily on teachers' consistency in embodying the religious values they seek to cultivate among students (Ardiyanti & Khairiah, 2021; Azwar, 2023).

The findings further reveal that individualized mentoring plays a crucial role in supporting students' participation in religious activities. During collective worship and other religious programs, teachers provide continuous assistance tailored to each student's needs. Some students require physical guidance when performing prayer movements, whereas others benefit from repeated verbal prompts, visual cues, or peer assistance to complete religious practices independently. Rather than

perceiving these accommodations as limitations, teachers regard individualized support as an essential component of inclusive education, enabling children with special needs to experience success in religious learning environments. Consequently, implementation is understood not as the standardization of religious activities but as the provision of equitable opportunities for all students to participate meaningfully in accordance with their developmental capacities.

Furthermore, the implementation of religious activities extends beyond formal classroom instruction into the broader culture of the school. Religious values are continuously reinforced through students' interactions during break times, extracurricular programs, school assemblies, and commemorations of Islamic holy days. Teachers encourage students to practice honesty, discipline, cooperation, empathy, and mutual respect in every aspect of school life, thereby transforming religious values into observable social behaviors. This integration of religious activities within the broader school culture strengthens the continuity between formal religious instruction and students' everyday experiences, ensuring that religious character develops through authentic social practice rather than isolated learning sessions. As a result, religious activities become a living component of the inclusive educational environment, contributing not only to students' spiritual development but also to the cultivation of positive interpersonal relationships among all members of the school community.

The implementation of religious activities also depends on the availability of a supportive learning environment that encourages children with special needs to participate confidently in religious practices. The findings reveal that both schools have attempted to create an inclusive atmosphere by ensuring that religious activities involve all students without discrimination. Regular students and children with special needs participate in the same religious programs, fostering mutual respect, empathy, and cooperation. Such interactions reduce social barriers while simultaneously strengthening peer acceptance. Teachers explained that inclusive participation enables children with special needs to learn appropriate religious behaviors by observing their peers, while allowing regular students to develop compassion, tolerance, and social responsibility. Consequently, religious activities serve not only as spiritual learning experiences but also as opportunities to strengthen inclusive social relationships (Nurdiniyah & Supriyadi, 2023; Salim et al., 2022).

The study further demonstrates that parental involvement significantly contributes to the successful implementation of religious activities. Parents were encouraged to reinforce school-based religious practices within the family environment by maintaining daily prayer routines, encouraging Qur'anic recitation, and modeling Islamic values during everyday interactions. Continuous communication between teachers and parents enabled schools to monitor students' behavioral development while ensuring consistency between home and school. Teachers acknowledged that children whose families consistently practiced religious values generally demonstrated more rapid progress in developing religious habits than those receiving limited reinforcement outside school. This finding highlights that religious character development cannot rely exclusively on formal education but requires continuous collaboration between educational institutions and families (Tsauri, 2015; Lastri et al., 2023).

Another important finding concerns the challenges encountered during implementation. Teachers identified differences in students' intellectual abilities, communication skills, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior as major challenges in conducting religious activities. Some students required repeated instruction to understand simple religious practices, whereas others had difficulty maintaining concentration during collective worship. The limited number of special education teachers and the absence of adequate instructional resources also affected the implementation process. Despite these challenges, teachers consistently adapted instructional strategies through simplified communication, visual learning media, peer assistance, and individualized mentoring. These adaptive responses demonstrate the schools' commitment to maintaining students' participation despite institutional and pedagogical limitations (Hanifah et al., 2021; Hasanah & Zailani, 2025; Melinda et al., 2025).

The findings further indicate that continuous evaluation constitutes an essential component of implementation. Rather than relying solely on formal assessment, teachers continuously observed students' behavioral development throughout daily religious activities. Evaluation focused on students' willingness to participate in collective worship, consistency in practicing religious habits, respect toward teachers and peers, responsibility for classroom duties, honesty, discipline, and

empathy. Teachers emphasized that evaluation aimed to identify individual progress rather than compare students' performance with predetermined academic standards. Such an assessment approach reflects the philosophy of inclusive education, recognizing that educational success should be measured according to each student's developmental progress and individual potential (Mulyasari & Muhtar, 2022; Romadhoni et al., 2023).

Overall, the implementation of religious activities in inclusive schools in Palembang reflects an adaptive educational process integrating habituation, role modelling, differentiated instruction, individualized mentoring, parental collaboration, and continuous evaluation. These interconnected components enable children with special needs to participate actively in religious activities while gradually internalizing Islamic values into their daily behavior. The findings suggest that successful implementation is determined not by the number of religious programs offered but by the consistency with which religious values are embedded in the school's culture and reinforced through collaborative educational practices. Therefore, the implementation framework identified in this study provides practical evidence that inclusive religious education can effectively foster religious character when educational practices are systematically adapted to students' diverse developmental needs.

Table 1. The Implementation Strategies of Religious Activities in Inclusive Schools

Implementation Component	Implementation Practices	Expected Religious Character Outcomes
Daily habituation	Collective prayer, Duha prayer, Qur'anic recitation, Islamic greetings, <i>dhikr</i>	Spiritual awareness, discipline, consistency in worship
Role modelling	Teachers demonstrate religious behaviour, honesty, patience, and respect	Positive imitation, moral behaviour, responsibility
Differentiated instruction	Adaptive learning materials, simplified instructions, visual media, individualized guidance	Equal participation and meaningful learning experiences
Individual mentoring	Direct assistance during worship and religious learning	Increased confidence and independence
Peer interaction	Joint participation between regular students and children with special needs	Empathy, cooperation, tolerance, social inclusion
Family collaboration	Parent-teacher communication and reinforcement of religious practices at home	Continuity of religious habits between school and home
Continuous evaluation	Observation of behavioural changes, participation, discipline, honesty, and empathy	Sustainable religious character development

As illustrated in Table 2, the implementation of religious activities extends beyond formal religious instruction by integrating multiple educational strategies into the everyday culture of inclusive schools. The interaction among habituation, teacher role modelling, differentiated instruction, collaborative support, and continuous evaluation creates a comprehensive educational environment in which children with special needs can gradually develop religious character according to their individual abilities and developmental trajectories. This holistic implementation framework demonstrates that religious character education in inclusive schools is not a single instructional activity but an ongoing educational process sustained through collaboration among teachers, parents, peers, and the broader school community.

Religious Character Outcomes among Children with Special Needs

The findings demonstrate that implementing religious activities in inclusive schools has significantly contributed to the development of religious character among children with special needs. Religious character was reflected not only in students' ability to perform religious rituals but also in the gradual transformation of their attitudes, behaviors, and social interactions within the school environment (Putkonen et al., 2025). Teachers consistently observed that regular

participation in structured religious activities encouraged students to develop greater spiritual awareness, increased self-discipline, and stronger commitment to practicing Islamic values in their daily lives. Rather than expecting immediate behavioral changes, the schools emphasized continuous habituation, recognizing that religious character develops progressively through repeated experiences and sustained educational guidance. This gradual transformation indicates that religious character formation should be understood as a developmental process rather than a short-term educational outcome (Fahrudin & Anwar, 2022).

One of the most prominent outcomes identified in this study is the improvement of students' worship habits. Before participating in structured religious programs, several children with special needs required frequent reminders to perform daily religious practices or showed limited interest in participating in collective worship. However, continuous exposure to school-based religious activities gradually encouraged students to perform prayers, recite short Qur'anic verses, greet teachers and peers using Islamic greetings, and participate in daily devotional practices with increasing independence (Ubaidillah et al., 2025; Fadillah & Miftahussurur, 2025). Teachers explained that repetitive participation enabled students to recognize religious routines as an ordinary part of everyday school life rather than as compulsory activities imposed by teachers. Such findings suggest that habituation provides an effective educational mechanism through which children with special needs gradually internalize religious practices according to their individual learning capacities (Karomah & Syuhud, 2026).

Beyond ritual participation, the findings reveal a substantial increase in students' spiritual awareness. Teachers observed that children became more conscious of appropriate religious behavior during classroom activities and social interactions. Students increasingly demonstrated respect when entering classrooms, listened attentively during collective prayers, and showed greater appreciation toward religious ceremonies conducted within the school (Alrumayh et al., 2025). Although the level of understanding varied according to students' cognitive abilities, their willingness to participate sincerely in religious activities reflected meaningful spiritual development. This finding indicates that spiritual awareness among children with special needs does not necessarily depend on sophisticated theological understanding but may emerge through repeated participation in religious experiences that are meaningful, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate (Patrick, 2014).

Another important outcome concerns the development of self-discipline through religious routines. The implementation of structured religious schedules encouraged students to follow daily school routines more consistently. Teachers reported that children gradually became accustomed to preparing themselves before collective prayers, maintaining personal cleanliness, waiting patiently for their turn during religious activities, and following classroom rules with greater responsibility. Such behavioral improvements demonstrate that religious activities contribute not only to students' spiritual growth but also to the development of self-regulation and behavioral control. This finding supports the argument that religious education can function as an effective medium for cultivating disciplined behavior because religious practices inherently require regularity, responsibility, and personal commitment (Rasyid et al., 2024; Antonius, 2022).

The findings further indicate that religious activities strengthened students' confidence in participating within inclusive educational environments. Initially, several children with special needs appeared hesitant to participate in collective worship or religious ceremonies due to limited communication skills or fear of making mistakes. Through continuous encouragement from teachers and supportive interactions with peers, students gradually demonstrated greater confidence in participating actively in religious activities. Teachers emphasized that the inclusive nature of religious programs reduced students' anxiety while promoting a sense of belonging within the school community. Consequently, participation in religious activities became an important medium through which children with special needs developed not only religious competence but also emotional security and social confidence. This outcome illustrates that inclusive religious education contributes simultaneously to spiritual development and psychosocial well-being (Adiyono et al., 2022).

Another significant finding is the emergence of greater consistency between religious understanding and observable behavior. Rather than limiting religious learning to classroom instruction, schools continuously reinforced Islamic values through everyday interactions. Students increasingly demonstrated polite communication, expressed gratitude more frequently, respected

teachers and classmates, and willingly assisted peers during learning activities. Teachers explained that these behavioral changes did not occur immediately but gradually developed through continuous modeling, positive reinforcement, and repeated practice embedded within daily school routines (Hastasari et al., 2022). Such consistency between religious instruction and actual behavior indicates that religious character becomes sustainable when educational values are repeatedly experienced in authentic social contexts rather than remaining abstract moral concepts. These findings therefore suggest that the outcomes of religious character education extend beyond ritual competence to encompass broader dimensions of personal morality, emotional maturity, and social responsibility, providing strong evidence that religious activities function as an effective educational mechanism for fostering holistic character development among children with special needs in inclusive schools (Aziz et al., 2025).

The findings also reveal that religious activities contributed substantially to the development of students' social morality, which became one of the most visible indicators of religious character formation in inclusive schools. Teachers consistently reported positive changes in students' interactions with peers, educators, and other members of the school community. Children with special needs gradually demonstrated greater respect toward teachers, greeted classmates more politely, shared learning materials willingly, and became more cooperative during classroom and extracurricular activities. These behavioral improvements were not viewed merely as expressions of social etiquette but as manifestations of religious values internalized through continuous participation in religious activities. Consequently, religious character development was reflected not only in students' worship practices but also in their ability to establish harmonious interpersonal relationships based on Islamic moral principles (Muttaqin et al., 2024).

Another significant outcome identified in this study is the development of empathy and mutual care among children with special needs. Through collective worship, religious celebrations, and collaborative classroom activities, students learned to appreciate differences and support one another regardless of individual abilities. Teachers explained that religious activities created opportunities for students to interact naturally within an inclusive environment, thereby reducing feelings of isolation while strengthening peer acceptance. Regular students were encouraged to assist classmates with special needs during religious activities, whereas children with special needs gradually developed confidence in participating within group settings (Blanchard et al., 2009). Such reciprocal interactions contributed to a more inclusive school culture where religious values promoted compassion, cooperation, and social responsibility. These findings support the perspective that religious education can serve as an effective medium for fostering inclusive attitudes and strengthening social cohesion among diverse learners (Prabawani et al., 2022).

The study further indicates that responsibility emerged as another essential dimension of religious character. Teachers observed that students increasingly completed classroom responsibilities independently, followed school regulations more consistently, and demonstrated greater commitment to maintaining cleanliness and order within the school environment. Religious routines such as preparing prayer equipment, organizing learning materials before worship, and participating actively in classroom responsibilities encouraged students to recognize the relationship between religious obligations and everyday responsibilities. Although the level of independence varied according to individual developmental characteristics, continuous practice enabled students to perform these responsibilities with progressively less assistance from teachers. This finding illustrates that religious activities contribute to character formation by connecting spiritual values with practical responsibilities in everyday school life (Mulyasa, 2022; Muttaqin et al., 2024).

The sustainability of religious character development was strongly influenced by collaboration among teachers, parents, and the wider school community. Teachers consistently emphasized that behavioral improvements observed at school were more likely to persist when similar religious practices were reinforced within the family environment. Parents who maintained regular prayer routines, encouraged polite communication, and modeled religious behavior at home significantly supported the continuity of character development initiated at school. Conversely, inconsistent reinforcement outside school often slowed students' behavioral progress despite active participation in school-based religious activities. These findings demonstrate that religious character cannot be developed solely through institutional educational programs but requires continuous interaction

between school culture and family practices. Such ecological collaboration strengthens the consistency of students' religious experiences across multiple educational contexts and contributes to the long-term sustainability of character development (Anisah, 2023).

Despite the positive outcomes identified in this study, participants also acknowledged several challenges affecting the continuity of religious character development. Differences in intellectual functioning, communication abilities, emotional regulation, and family support resulted in variations in students' rates of progress. Some children demonstrated rapid behavioral improvements, whereas others required considerably longer periods of habituation before observable changes emerged. Teachers therefore emphasized the importance of patience, individualized guidance, and continuous encouragement rather than expecting uniform developmental outcomes. These findings reinforce the inclusive education principle that educational success should be evaluated by individual progress rather than by standardized performance indicators. Accordingly, religious character formation among children with special needs should be understood as a dynamic and individualized developmental process requiring sustained educational commitment and adaptive pedagogical strategies (U. Hasanah, 2021).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the outcomes of religious activities extend far beyond improving students' participation in religious rituals. Religious activities foster spiritual awareness, worship habits, discipline, empathy, responsibility, respect, cooperation, and social inclusion, collectively constituting the essential dimensions of religious character among children with special needs. More importantly, the findings reveal that successful character formation results from the interaction of adaptive instructional practices, consistent habituation, teacher role modelling, parental involvement, and an inclusive school culture. This study therefore provides empirical evidence that religious activities constitute an effective educational mechanism for fostering holistic religious character among children with special needs in inclusive schools. The findings also enrich the existing literature by demonstrating that religious character development is best understood as a comprehensive educational process that integrates spiritual, moral, social, and behavioral dimensions within an inclusive learning environment. Such a perspective offers valuable implications for the development of more adaptive and sustainable religious character education programs in inclusive schools, particularly within the Indonesian educational context.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that religious activities play a fundamental role in constructing religious character among children with special needs in inclusive schools in Palembang. Rather than functioning solely as complementary religious programs, these activities constitute an integrated educational framework that systematically combines religious values with inclusive educational practices. The findings reveal that the design of religious activities is based on a comprehensive process involving needs assessment among students, adaptive educational objectives, contextualized religious content, and differentiated instructional strategies tailored to the diverse characteristics of children with special needs. Such a construction enables inclusive schools to provide equitable opportunities for all students to participate meaningfully in religious learning while accommodating their individual developmental capacities.

The implementation of religious activities is characterized by continuous habituation, teacher role modelling, individualized mentoring, differentiated instruction, parental collaboration, and the integration of religious values into the broader culture of the school. These interconnected strategies create an inclusive learning environment in which religious values are not merely taught but consistently practiced through everyday educational experiences. The study further reveals that successful implementation depends on collaborative support among school leaders, teachers, parents, and peers, enabling children with special needs to engage in religious learning within supportive, socially inclusive environments.

The findings further indicate that the outcomes of religious activities extend beyond the acquisition of religious knowledge and ritual practices. Children with special needs demonstrated noticeable improvements in worship habits, spiritual awareness, discipline, responsibility, honesty, empathy, respect, cooperation, and social interaction. These behavioral changes illustrate that religious character develops gradually through sustained participation in adaptive religious activities rather than through conventional classroom instruction alone. The integration of religious

values into daily school life enables students to internalize Islamic principles as part of their personal and social behavior, thereby strengthening both their spiritual development and their participation within inclusive educational communities.

This study contributes theoretically by extending the discourse on religious character education through the integration of inclusive education principles with adaptive religious learning. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on religious instruction or teacher competence, this research demonstrates that religious character formation is a systemic and collaborative process involving interactions among instructional practices, school culture, family engagement, and individual student characteristics. Practically, the findings provide an evidence-based framework for designing religious activities that are responsive to the diverse needs of children with special needs while promoting sustainable character development in inclusive schools.

Future research may expand this investigation by examining the implementation of similar religious character programs across different educational levels, cultural settings, and religious traditions. Comparative studies involving various types of disabilities and broader geographical contexts would further strengthen understanding of how inclusive religious education can effectively support holistic character development in diverse educational environments. Such investigations will contribute to the continuous improvement of inclusive education policies and the development of more adaptive models of religious character education in Indonesia and other multicultural societies.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Lianawaty conceived the study, designed the research methodology, collected and analyzed the data, interpreted the findings, prepared the original manuscript, coordinated the research process, revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content, and approved the final version of the manuscript. Prof. Dr. Munir, M.Ag., contributed to the conceptualization of the study, provided academic supervision, validated the research design and the interpretation of the findings, critically reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content, and approved the final version of the manuscript. Dr. Ema Yudianti, M.Si. contributed to the research methodology, data interpretation, validation of the research findings, critical revision of the manuscript, and approved the final version of the manuscript. Dr. Maryamah, M.Pd. contributed to data analysis, interpretation of the results, manuscript review and editing, provided constructive feedback for improving the manuscript, and approved the final version of the manuscript. Dr. Muhammad Torik, Lc., M.A. contributed to the theoretical framework, the interpretation of the findings from an Islamic studies perspective, the critical review of the manuscript, the supervision of the overall research quality, and the approval of the final version of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript and accept responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of all aspects of the work.

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