

INTERNALIZATION OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS AWARENESS THROUGH SCHOOL CULTURE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY AT SMP MUHAMMADIYAH 9 SURABAYA

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| <p>Article Information: Received: March 11th 2026 Revised: June 20th 2026 Accepted: June 25th 2026 Published: June 30th 2026</p> <p>Keywords: religious awareness; school culture; Islamic education; value internalization; adolescents</p> | <p>Abstract</p> <p>Religious awareness plays a crucial role in shaping adolescent character, particularly amidst the challenges of digital culture, rapid social change, and the complexities of modern life. While previous research has largely focused on religious programs, instructional strategies, and character education practices, studies examining students' subjective experiences in developing religious awareness through Islamic school culture remain relatively limited. This study aims to explore the process of internalizing Islamic religious awareness among students at SMP Muhammadiyah 9 Surabaya, covering the forms of internalization, the roles of Islamic Religious Education teachers and school culture, and the facilitating and inhibiting factors influencing the process. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was employed. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving four purposively selected students, an Islamic Religious Education teacher, and the school principal. The findings indicate that the internalization of religious awareness occurs through three continuous stages: value transformation, value transaction, and trans-internalization. This process guides the development of students' religious awareness from a cognitive understanding of Islamic teachings toward internally regulated religious behavior. Student experiences—such as congregational prayers, Quranic recitation, religious habituation, positive social interactions, and teacher role-modeling—play a vital role in reinforcing the internalization of Islamic values. Key facilitating factors include a consistent and religious school culture, teacher role-modeling, and peer support, whereas the influence of digital culture and the social environment outside the school serve as significant inhibiting factors. The study concludes that a consistent Islamic school culture functions as an effective social ecosystem for facilitating the internalization of Islamic values and fostering intrinsic religious awareness in students' daily lives</p> |
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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical stage of human development characterized by significant psychological, emotional, and social changes. During this period, adolescents actively

construct their identities while being exposed to various influences that shape their values, attitudes, and behaviours. Religious awareness plays an important role in helping adolescents develop moral responsibility, self-control, and spiritual resilience in navigating contemporary social challenges. However, the rapid development of digital technology and social media has exposed adolescents to diverse lifestyles, value systems, and patterns of interaction that are not always aligned with religious teachings. Consequently, strengthening religious awareness has become increasingly important as a foundation for guiding adolescents in making ethical and responsible decisions in their daily lives (Estrada et al., 2019; Hardy & King, 2019).

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is expected to function not only as a medium for transmitting religious knowledge but also as a process of cultivating moral character (*akhlakul karimah*) and fostering students' spiritual development. Research indicates that effective IRE requires a holistic approach integrating cognitive learning, religious habituation, role modelling, and supportive school culture (Amri et al., 2019; Munawir et al., 2024). Nevertheless, religious education in many schools remains predominantly cognitive in orientation, emphasizing the mastery of religious concepts and memorization of texts. Such an approach may create a gap between students' religious knowledge and their actual attitudes and behaviours. To address this challenge, educators need to employ strategies such as *Uswah Hasanah*, in which teachers consistently embody the values they seek to instil in students (Biantoro, 2019; Tambak, 2021).

Previous studies have examined the internalization of religious values through religious programs, character education initiatives, extracurricular activities, and school culture (Al Amin, 2024; Hidayati, 2022). While these studies provide important insights into institutional strategies and educational practices, they largely focus on program implementation and educational outcomes. Limited attention has been given to how students subjectively experience, interpret, negotiate, and internalize religious values through their everyday interactions within Islamic school environments. Consequently, the process through which religious values become integrated into students' personal awareness and daily behaviour remains insufficiently understood (Yusanto, 2020). In phenomenological terms, little is known about the lived experiences through which adolescents encounter, interpret, and gradually internalize religious values within the everyday realities of Islamic school life. Understanding these lived experiences is important because religious awareness develops not only through formal instruction but also through the meanings students construct from

their daily interactions, relationships, and participation in school culture.

The significance of this issue extends beyond the Indonesian context. Similar challenges concerning value formation, moral development, and religious identity are encountered in various faith-based educational settings worldwide. Research conducted in Christian, Jewish, and other religious schools has demonstrated the importance of school culture, role modelling, and value habituation in shaping students' moral and spiritual development. Therefore, investigating the internalization of religious awareness within an Islamic school context may contribute to broader discussions on faith-based education, character formation, and values education across different cultural and religious settings.

Research conducted in various faith-based educational settings has highlighted the importance of school culture, role modelling, and value habituation in shaping students' moral identity and religious development. Faith-based schools contribute not only to academic learning but also to the formation of moral, spiritual, and character-related dispositions that influence students' everyday decision-making and social behaviour. Previous studies have shown that values are more likely to be internalized when they are consistently reinforced through institutional culture, meaningful relationships, and repeated practice. Therefore, examining religious awareness within an Islamic school context may offer insights that are relevant to broader discussions of character education and faith-based schooling across different cultural and religious traditions (D'Agostino & Asadullah, 2025; King, 2003; Lickona, 1996).

This study was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 9 Surabaya, a private Islamic junior secondary school under the Muhammadiyah educational movement, one of the largest Islamic educational organizations in Indonesia. The school serves students aged approximately 13-15 years and integrates Islamic values into both academic and non-academic activities through congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation programs, religious mentoring, and character-building initiatives. Supported by a school culture that emphasizes moral exemplarity, religious habituation, and collective responsibility, the institution provides a rich context for exploring how religious awareness develops through students' everyday experiences. The school employs both male and female teachers, all of whom are Muslims in accordance with the institution's religious mission. Beyond their instructional responsibilities, teachers are expected to serve as moral exemplars and actively participate in religious activities that reinforce the school's Islamic culture. This institutional policy contributes to the

consistency between religious instruction and everyday practice within the school environment. As a private fee paying institution, student enrollment is primarily based on parental choice rather than geographical zoning. Families generally choose the school because of its emphasis on Islamic values, character education, and the development of a supportive religious environment. These characteristics make the school particularly relevant for investigating how religious awareness is formed through everyday educational experiences. The school was selected because it systematically integrates Islamic values into daily educational practices and has established a distinctive religious culture that provides a particularly relevant setting for investigating students' experiences of religious awareness formation.

Understanding how religious awareness develops through students' everyday experiences is important for educators, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to strengthen character education and value formation among adolescents in increasingly complex social environments. The novelty of this study lies not only in examining students' lived experiences of religious awareness formation but also in conceptualizing the internalization process through the interconnected stages of value transformation, value transaction, and transinternalization within the context of Islamic school culture. This perspective offers a deeper understanding of how religious knowledge is transformed into intrinsically motivated religious behaviour and integrated into adolescents' personal identities. Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on value internalization and faith-based education by highlighting the role of school culture as a social ecosystem that facilitates the development of intrinsic religious awareness.

Based on this background, this study aims to explore the internalization of Islamic religious awareness among students at SMP Muhammadiyah 9 Surabaya. Specifically, the study investigates the forms of religious awareness internalization, the role of Islamic Religious Education teachers and school culture in facilitating the process, as well as the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing students' religious development.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore students' lived experiences in internalizing Islamic religious awareness. The phenomenological approach was selected to understand how students perceive, interpret,

and give meaning to religious values acquired through religious habituation and daily social interactions. This design is rooted in the phenomenological tradition of Moustakas (1994), which emphasizes capturing the essence of a phenomenon through the subjective narratives of individuals who directly experience it.

The research was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 9 Surabaya, Indonesia. The school was selected because it systematically integrates Islamic values into daily educational practices and has established a distinctive religious culture that provides a rich context for exploring students' experiences of religious awareness formation. Participants consisted of four students, one Islamic Religious Education teacher, and the school principal. The four students were selected using purposive sampling based on their active participation in religious activities and their ability to articulate personal experiences. In phenomenological research, depth and richness of experience are prioritized over statistical generalization. The selected participants represented students who were actively engaged in the school's religious culture and capable of providing detailed phenomenological descriptions. Data saturation was considered achieved when interviews yielded recurring patterns and themes related to students' religious awareness, and no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews.

Data were collected through observation, semi structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted to examine students' participation in religious activities and daily interactions within the school environment. To minimize the observer effect, prolonged engagement was applied. The researcher spent sufficient time in the field before formal data collection began, allowing participants to become familiar with the researcher's presence and helping ensure that observed behaviours reflected natural school practices rather than reactions to being observed. Observations were conducted repeatedly during religious activities, including congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation sessions, and other school based religious programs.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to explore participants' lived experiences and personal interpretations of religious awareness. Interviewing adolescents, who often occupy a dependent position within educational settings, requires particular attention to potential social desirability bias. Therefore, the interview guide was developed using open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection and personal narratives rather than predetermined responses. Prior to data collection, rapport was established with

participants to create a comfortable and trusting environment. During the interviews, the researcher maintained a non judgmental stance and encouraged participants to describe their experiences freely. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was audio recorded with participants' consent.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. These procedures were employed to organize and manage the data, while phenomenological interpretation followed the approach proposed by Moustakas (1994). The analysis was carried out iteratively through repeated reading of interview transcripts to identify significant statements related to students' experiences of religious awareness. These statements were then transformed into meaning units and subsequently clustered into broader themes. The themes were continuously refined through comparison across participants and triangulation with observational and documentary data to reveal the essence of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 1 presents an example of the phenomenological analysis process.

Table 1. Example of Phenomenological Data Analysis

| Significant Statement | Meaning Unit | Emerging Theme |
|---|---|-------------------------------|
| "Teachers explain why prayer is important, not only tell us to do it." | Understanding precedes behavioural commitment. | Value Transformation |
| "My friends encourage me to join Dhuha prayer every morning." | Peer interaction reinforces religious participation. | Value Transaction |
| "I feel something is missing when I do not have time to read the Qur'an." | Religious practice becomes a personal spiritual need. | Transinternalization |
| "I continue praying even when nobody reminds me." | Religious values are internally regulated. | Intrinsic Religious Awareness |

For example, the statement "I feel something is missing when I do not have time to read the Qur'an" was interpreted as reflecting an internal emotional and spiritual need, which was categorized under the theme of transinternalization. Through this iterative analytical process, individual experiences were synthesized into thematic descriptions that captured the essence of students' religious awareness formation.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, source triangulation was applied by

comparing information obtained from students, the Islamic Religious Education teacher, and the school principal, as well as across observations and documentation. Furthermore, the researcher positioned himself as an independent external investigator with no employment or administrative ties to the school, thereby maintaining professional objectivity throughout the research process. To further enhance the credibility of the findings, preliminary interpretations were discussed with selected participants to ensure that the emerging themes accurately reflected their experiences. Although the institutional identity of the school is disclosed for contextual purposes, all individual participants were anonymized and represented using pseudonyms to protect their privacy and confidentiality in accordance with established qualitative research ethics (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Internalization of Islamic Religious Awareness

The findings indicate that the internalization of Islamic religious awareness is a gradual and dynamic process through which students construct personal meaning from religious experiences encountered within the school environment. Participants described various empirical experiences, including congregational Dhuha and Dhuhr prayers, Qur'an recitation sessions, religious mentoring activities, classroom discussions on Islamic values, charity programs, and daily interactions with teachers who consistently modelled Islamic behaviour. These experiences provided students with opportunities not only to learn religious concepts but also to practice, interpret, and internalize them in everyday life.

Table 2. Stages of the Internalization of Islamic Religious Awareness

| Stage | Main Characteristics | Indicators |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Value Transformation | Transmission of religious values through learning activities | Understanding of Islamic teachings and moral values |
| Value Transaction | Interaction and habituation through religious activities | Participation in congregational prayer, Qur'an recitation, and religious programs |
| Transinternalization | Internal integration of religious values | Self-regulated religious behaviour and intrinsic religious awareness |

Source: Research findings (2025).

Value Transformation

The first stage involved students' efforts to understand religious teachings and connect them to their personal experiences.

One participant stated:

"Before entering this school, I knew that prayer was obligatory, but I did not really understand why it was important. Here, teachers explain its meaning and how it relates to everyday life." (Student A)

Another student explained:

"Religious lessons become easier to understand because teachers often connect them with situations we experience every day." (Student B)

The Islamic Religious Education teacher further explained:

"Our objective is not merely to teach religious concepts but to help students understand how Islamic values can guide their daily decisions and behaviour." (Teacher A)

These findings indicate that religious learning functioned as a process of cognitive contextualization through which students connected Islamic teachings with their everyday realities.

Value Transaction

The second stage emerged through active participation in religious practices and social interaction within the school environment.

One participant stated:

"At first, I joined Dhuha prayer because everyone else participated. After some time, I became accustomed to it and started to enjoy it." (Student C)

Another student explained:

"My friends often remind me when I forget to join religious activities, so I feel encouraged to participate." (Student D)

The teacher similarly observed:

"Students initially participate because of school routines, but gradually many of them become more enthusiastic and begin participating without being reminded." (Teacher A)

These findings suggest that participation in religious practices was reinforced not only by institutional expectations but also by peer interaction, social belonging, and repeated exposure to religious activities. Although students participated in religious routines from the beginning of their schooling, participation during this stage became increasingly conscious and meaningful.

Transinternalization

The final stage was characterized by the emergence of intrinsic religious awareness.

One participant expressed:

"I feel something is missing when I do not have time to read the Qur'an." (Student C)

Another student stated:

"Even when teachers are not around, I still try to pray on time because I feel responsible for it myself." (Student A)

The principal emphasized:

"The ultimate goal of our educational process is not compliance but awareness. We want students to continue practising these values even when they are outside the school environment." (Principal)

These statements indicate that religious values had become integrated into students' personal identities and no longer depended solely on institutional supervision. Religious awareness was experienced as a personal commitment that guided everyday behaviour. An important issue emerging from this stage concerns the relationship between religious habituation and religious meaning. The findings suggest that repeated participation in religious activities functions not only as a behavioural routine but also as a medium through which students construct personal spiritual meaning. Similar to other structured routines such as physical exercise, meditation, or daily reading practices, religious activities may contribute to self-discipline and emotional stability. However, participants consistently associated these practices with spiritual beliefs, moral responsibility, and a sense of closeness to God. This suggests that the significance of religious practices extends beyond routine formation alone, as they acquire personal and spiritual meaning through continuous interpretation and lived experience.

The Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers and School Culture

The findings reveal that teachers and school culture function as important mediators in the formation of religious awareness. Participants consistently described teachers as role models whose actions reinforced the values taught in the classroom.

One student explained:

"Teachers do not only tell us to pray; they also pray together with us and show us how to behave." (Student B)

Another participant stated:

"Seeing teachers consistently practise what they teach makes it easier for us to follow their example." (Student D)

These findings reflect the implementation of the *Uswah Hasanah* strategy, which refers to consistency between words and actions. Rather than relying on authoritarian commands, teachers provided instruction, guidance, discussion, and spiritual mentoring through direct example. This finding resonates with contemporary educational perspectives that position teachers as facilitators, mentors, discussion partners, and role models. The distinctive characteristic observed in this study is the integration of spiritual guidance within these professional roles.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Formation of Islamic Religious Awareness

Table 3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

| Supporting Factors | Inhibiting Factors |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Teacher role modelling | Digital distractions |
| Religious school culture | Excessive social media exposure |
| Religious habituation programs | External peer influence |
| Positive peer support | Inconsistent social environments |

Several factors were identified as supporting the internalization process.

One participant stated:

"My friends often remind me to participate in religious activities when I forget." (Student D)

Another student explained:

"Teachers consistently demonstrate good behaviour, which motivates us to follow their example." (Student B)

The principal further noted:

"A strong school culture creates a shared commitment that helps students practise religious values consistently." (Principal)

These findings indicate that peer support, teacher exemplarity, religious habituation programs, and a consistent school culture function as important supporting factors in strengthening religious awareness.

At the same time, participants identified several inhibiting factors.

One student explained:

"Social media sometimes distracts me from religious activities because I spend too much time online." (Student C)

Another participant stated:

"Outside school, not all of my friends have the same habits, so it can be difficult to remain consistent." (Student A)

These findings demonstrate that digital culture and external social environments may challenge the continuity of religious awareness formation. The contrast between the structured religious environment of the school and the broader social environment highlights the importance of developing reflective autonomy among adolescents. Therefore, schools need not only to cultivate religious habits but also to equip students with critical capacities that enable them to maintain their values across diverse social and digital contexts.

The findings support broader discussions within the literature on faith-based education, which emphasize that school culture functions as an important context for identity formation and value internalization. Consistent with previous studies, religious practices, teacher role modelling, and shared institutional values appear to facilitate the development of moral identity, self-regulation, and intrinsic commitment among adolescents. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of faith-based education lies not merely in religious instruction but in the integration of values into students' everyday experiences and social interactions. In this regard, the findings of the present study resonate with broader educational perspectives that view schools as communities of practice in which values are learned, enacted, and internalized through participation in a shared culture (D'Agostino & Asadullah, 2025; Hardy & King, 2019; King, 2003; Lickona, 1996).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the internalization of Islamic religious awareness among students at SMP Muhammadiyah 9 Surabaya is a gradual and dynamic process that occurs through three interconnected stages: value transformation, value transaction, and transinternalization. Religious awareness develops from an initial cognitive understanding of Islamic teachings, progresses through active participation in religious practices, and ultimately becomes an internally regulated commitment that guides students' everyday behaviour. These findings demonstrate that religious awareness is not formed solely through religious instruction but through continuous interaction between knowledge, experience, and reflection within a supportive educational environment.

The findings reveal that students' religious awareness is strengthened through various

empirical experiences, including congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation activities, religious mentoring, positive peer interaction, and consistent teacher role modelling. The implementation of *Uswah Hasanah*, reflected in the alignment between teachers' words and actions, plays a significant role in facilitating the internalization of religious values. In addition, a supportive school culture provides opportunities for students to repeatedly experience, practise, and reflect upon religious values in meaningful ways, enabling those values to become part of their personal identities.

The study also identifies several supporting and inhibiting factors influencing the internalization process. Supporting factors include teacher exemplarity, religious habituation programs, positive peer support, and a consistent religious school culture. In contrast, digital distractions, excessive social media exposure, and external social environments that do not reinforce religious practices may hinder the continuity of religious awareness formation. These findings suggest that religious education should not be limited to classroom instruction but should be supported by a broader educational ecosystem that encourages the practical enactment of religious values in everyday life.

This study contributes to the broader literature on value internalization, character education, and faith based schooling by demonstrating how school culture can transform religious knowledge into meaningful and sustainable religious practice. The findings further indicate that the development of intrinsic commitment and reflective autonomy is essential for helping adolescents maintain their values amid increasingly complex social and digital influences. Although conducted within the context of an Indonesian Islamic school, the findings may offer relevant insights for other faith based educational institutions seeking to strengthen students' moral, spiritual, and character development. These findings reinforce broader evidence from faithbased education research that school culture plays a pivotal role in fostering moral identity, value internalization, and character development among adolescents across diverse religious contexts (D'Agostino & Asadullah, 2025; King, 2003; Lickona, 1996).

This study is limited to a small number of participants within a single school context. Therefore, the findings should be understood as context-specific and are not intended for statistical generalization. Future studies may involve a larger number of participants, different educational settings, or comparative investigations across various faith-based schools to further explore how religious awareness, value internalization, and character formation

develop among adolescents in diverse social and cultural contexts.

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