

The Implementation of Democratic Education in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Learning to Shape the Creative Character of Students in Madrasah Aliyah

Rosyada Ayu Fatimah¹, Arif Rahman², Betty Mauli Rosa Bustam³
¹²³⁴ Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received June 1, 2025

Revised June 17, 2025

Accepted June 20, 2025

Keywords: Democratic education, creative character, PAI learning, Madrasah Aliyah

ABSTRACT

Character education is an important issue in forming a young generation with integrity and creativity. However, the lack of emphasis on this aspect in learning, especially at the madrasah level, is still an obstacle. This study aims to identify the implementation of democratic education by teachers in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, explain the process of forming students' creative character, and analyze its impact. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method at MA Al-Ichsan Kulon Progo. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model. The results showed that teachers implemented democratic education by creating a participatory, reflective, and collaborative learning atmosphere. Democratic education has proven effective in forming students' creative character as reflected through aspects of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. The impact is seen in increasing students' independence, creativity, and adaptability in PAI learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century requires not only mastery of academic competencies, but also the development of students' character so that they are able to face increasingly complex social, cultural, and technological challenges. One issue that continues to be highlighted in the world of education is the less than optimal instillation of character values in the learning process (Sirnayatin 2022). Character education is considered an important foundation for forming a generation with integrity, responsibility, creativity, and the ability to contribute positively to society (Martoyo and Pambudi 2025). Therefore, a participatory and humanistic educational approach is increasingly needed in the learning process in schools, including in religious-based educational institutions such as Madrasah Aliyah.

This study focuses on the implementation of democratic education by teachers in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at Madrasah Aliyah, and its impact on the formation of students' creative character.

Several previous studies have examined the implementation of character education in Madrasah Aliyah. For example, a study at MAN 3 Yogyakarta showed that the implementation

of character education through madrasah culture has been carried out well, despite challenges from different student backgrounds and technological developments (Hayah 2018). Another study at MAN 1 Mamuju revealed that the implementation of character education culture through subjects, self-development, and madrasah culture has shown positive results (Azizah 2022). However, these studies have not specifically examined the implementation of democratic education in Islamic Religious Education learning and its impact on students' creative character.

Although there have been many studies on character education in Madrasah Aliyah, there has been no study that deeply examines the application of democratic education in Islamic Religious Education learning and how this application can shape students' creative character. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the application of democratic education by teachers in Islamic Religious Education learning and its impact on students' creative character.

This research is expected to contribute to the development of a democratic education model in Madrasah Aliyah, especially in Islamic Religious Education learning. The results of this study can be a reference for the development of curriculum and learning strategies that emphasize character education, as well as provide insight for educators and policy makers in an effort to form a young generation with integrity, creativity, and adaptation to changing times.

One approach that is relevant to these needs is democratic education. Democratic education focuses on the active involvement of students in the learning process, respect for diversity, and the creation of reflective and collaborative spaces (Bhoki, Are, and Ola 2025). This approach is in line with John Dewey's view, which views that education must be part of democratic life itself (Erikson, Naibaho, and Rantung 2023). In democratic education, teachers are no longer the only source of knowledge, but act as facilitators who support the process of forming meaningful learning experiences (Muadzin 2021). Learning is designed to encourage students to think critically, express opinions openly, and be involved in decision-making that affects their learning process.

In the context of religious education, especially Islamic Religious Education (PAI), the application of a democratic approach is very strategic. PAI education does not only aim to transmit Islamic teachings normatively, but also to shape students into individuals with noble morals, who are critical, and have social sensitivity (Mukhlisin et al. 2023). One important character that is relevant to this goal is creative character. Creative character is not only related to the ability to produce new ideas, but also includes courage in independent thinking, problem solving skills, and openness to differences (Muqodas 2015). This can be seen, for example, in project-based learning in PAI classes that provide space for students to explore Islamic values through work, group discussions, and presentations. In addition, a democratic approach is also reflected in the

involvement of students in class decision-making and conflict resolution through deliberation, which encourages critical and creative thinking skills simultaneously.

However, in reality, many schools and madrasahs in Indonesia have not yet optimally integrated character education, especially creative character, into Islamic Religious Education learning. Learning is still one-way and teacher-centered, with little room for students to express themselves or have critical dialogues (Noor 2019). Therefore, it is important to examine democratic education practices in Islamic Religious Education learning as an effort to strengthen students' creative character more effectively. Several studies have shown that participatory and problem-based learning models, which give students the freedom to explore teaching materials independently, are still rarely applied in Islamic Religious Education classes. In fact, these learning models have been shown to improve students' critical and creative thinking skills, as well as build attitudes of responsibility and collaboration, as shown in research by Ramadhan and Kurniawati (2021) which examined the implementation of project-based learning in the context of Islamic Religious Education. This shows the urgency to design more democratic and creative learning strategies in madrasah and school environments (Ramadhan, R., & Kurniawati 2021). In addition, observations in the field indicate the minimal use of methods that encourage open discussion or collaborative projects that can foster student creativity.

MA Al-Ichsan Kulon Progo is one of the madrasahs that has tried to apply a democratic education approach in Islamic Religious Education learning. This practice is interesting to be studied further because it has the potential to answer the challenges of developing creative character among madrasah students (Damanik et al. 2025). This study aims to identify the application of democratic education by teachers in Islamic Religious Education learning, explain the process of forming students' creative character in this learning, and analyze the impact of democratic education on the development of students' creative character. By examining the relationship between democratic education and the formation of creative character in Islamic Religious Education learning, this study is expected to provide conceptual and practical contributions to the development of learning models that are relevant to the needs of the 21st century, while strengthening the role of religious education in forming a young generation that is not only religious, but also innovative and socially responsible.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study type. The location of the study is MA Al-Ichsan Kulon Progo. The subjects of the study consisted of Islamic Religious Education teachers and students selected using purposive sampling techniques. Data collection techniques include in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation. Data analysis uses the Miles and Huberman model: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions/verification.

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study type of research. This approach was chosen to deeply understand how the application of democratic education in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning can shape the creative character of students in Madrasah Aliyah. The subjects of the study are PAI teachers, the head of the madrasah, and students at one selected Madrasah Aliyah through purposive sampling. Data collection techniques were conducted through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted to explore the views, experiences, and strategies of teachers in applying democratic values in learning. Observations were made to directly observe the learning process and classroom interactions. Documentation was used to supplement data in the form of lesson plans, student works, and other school records. Data analysis was performed using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion/verification. To ensure the validity of the data, source and method triangulation techniques were used, along with member checking with the informants.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data obtained from the observation, it shows that the implementation of democratic education by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at MA Al-Ichsan Kulon Progo provides a significant contribution to the formation of students' creative character. Democratic education carried out in this context not only focuses on the active involvement of students in the learning process, but also prioritizes values such as respect for differences, freedom of thought, and collaboration as the foundation of learning that is character-based and relevant to the needs of the 21st century. This is reinforced by the results of interviews with teachers and students which show that an open classroom atmosphere encourages students to be more courageous in expressing ideas, thinking critically, and working together to complete tasks creatively. In addition, learning documents such as lesson plans and teacher diaries show that learning strategies are designed to provide space for student expression and joint decision-making. All of these data show that democratic education that is consistently implemented can shape students' creative character through participatory learning experiences and respect for freedom of thought.

Islamic Religious Education teachers at MA Al-Ichsan Kulon Progo implement democratic education through dialogical and reflective learning. Teachers do not act as the sole source of knowledge, but rather as facilitators who guide students in building critical and contextual understanding. This approach is in line with John Dewey's ideas, which emphasize the importance of education as a social process that encourages active participation, reflection, and the development of students' critical thinking skills in democratic life (Dewey 1916). The classroom atmosphere

created provides space for students to express opinions, discuss, and develop ideas openly. Students are given the trust to express their views on religious material, even on social issues related to Islamic values. This creates a more meaningful learning process because students feel valued as individuals who have a voice and thoughts. The results of research conducted by Ni'mah in the Journal of Mandalika Literature also show that the dialogical approach in Islamic Religious Education learning significantly increases student involvement and strengthens democratic characters, such as tolerance and responsibility (Ni'mah and Afendi 2025). Thus, the democratic education that is implemented not only forms an inclusive religious understanding, but also strengthens the values of humanity and diversity.

Democratic education implemented by teachers is also characterized by respect for students' personal experiences and backgrounds. Diversity is positioned as a strength that enriches classroom discussions, not as an obstacle. Learning takes place collaboratively, where students not only learn from teachers, but also from their friends through active interaction in group discussions, presentations, and case studies that are relevant to their lives. This is in line with Freire's view in Pedagogy of the Oppressed which emphasizes the importance of dialogue and equality in educational relations, where students are valued as subjects who have experience and knowledge (Freire 1970). Reflection is an important part of this learning process. Teachers consistently invite students to evaluate the values they learn and relate them to the social context and their daily life experiences. Based on the results of observations, it can be seen that students are able to relate religious material such as honesty, tolerance, and responsibility to real situations they face, such as in the family, school, and community environments. Interviews with students also showed that this approach made them feel more emotionally and intellectually involved, and encouraged them to be more open to differences.

Learning documentation, including student worksheets and reflection journals written after the learning process, showed that students were able to express their thoughts independently and critically. This finding is also supported by research by Rusdi in the Journal of Islamic Religious Education, which states that PAI learning based on reflection and collaboration improves students' understanding of Islamic values contextually and strengthens their social character (Romlah and Rusdi 2023). In addition, Efendi in his journal added that democratic education that places students in an active and dialogical position is able to encourage deeper internalization of moral and social values (Efendi, Ningsih, and SS 2022). Thus, democratic education not only creates an inclusive and dialogical learning space, but also encourages the internalization of religious values in real life for students.

The implementation of democratic education has been proven to have an impact on the formation of students' creative character. Students are not only able to think independently, but also

show courage in conveying ideas, the ability to solve problems with different approaches, and high social sensitivity (Nurriska Tieto Oktaviani and Supriyadi 2024). This creative character develops through a learning process that provides space for divergent thinking, namely thinking broadly and openly to various possible solutions (Siswono 2016). In class discussions, for example, students are trained to express ideas from diverse perspectives, and are invited to consider the various consequences of the opinions they take. This is in line with the view of Thomas Lickona, who emphasizes that character education must provide opportunities for students to think critically, make moral decisions, and act based on values they believe in, as part of the process of forming a complete character (Lickona 1991). In addition, Ken Robinson emphasizes that creativity is an essential part of the educational process, and schools should be places that encourage students to explore ideas, take intellectual risks, and express themselves originally as part of the development of creative character (Robinson 2011). Thus, democratic education not only shapes students into morally and socially responsible citizens, but also creates a creative, innovative and adaptive generation in facing the challenges of a changing world (Hakim 2023). Furthermore, the development of this creative character is seen in the social skills demonstrated by students, such as the ability to work together in groups, tolerance for differences of opinion, and empathy for social issues. Moral values such as responsibility, respect, and honesty become an integral part of the democratic learning process (Salahudin, Irawan, and Furkan 2024). With high emotional and intellectual involvement in learning, students not only understand these values, but also internalize them as part of their personality.

The concept of democratic education adopted by Islamic Religious Education teachers is also in line with John Dewey's view, which emphasizes that education should not separate students from real life, but rather become a vehicle for forming citizens who think critically, fairly, and responsibly. Teachers do not merely convey material, but create learning spaces that allow for dialogue, reflective thinking, and valuable social actions (Koesoema 2015). In addition, the formation of students' creative character is also influenced by a comprehensive moral approach, as explained by Thomas Lickona. Moral knowledge, moral feelings, and moral actions are not only taught separately, but are integrated in participatory learning. Students understand values, feel the importance of these values, and then consciously apply them in real actions, both in the classroom and in social interactions outside the classroom.

This view is reinforced by Vygotsky's thinking, which states that creativity is the result of social interaction and can be developed through the support of a conducive environment (Vygotsky 1978). Education that provides space for exploration, collaboration, and tolerance for mistakes is key to fostering students' creative potential. In this context, a democratic educational approach has been shown to support this process. Students who are accustomed to an open learning environment

that values creativity tend to be more courageous in exploring ideas, are not afraid of making mistakes, and are more adaptive in facing changes and challenges. This is in line with Craft's findings which emphasize the importance of "possibility thinking" in creative education, namely the ability of children to think about new possibilities as a form of expression of their creativity (Craft 2005). From all these findings, it can be concluded that democratic education in Islamic Religious Education learning not only improves the quality of interaction between teachers and students, but also has a long-term impact on the development of students' creative character. Democratic learning makes students more active, reflective, and responsible in their learning process (Suatini 2019). This is important in forming a generation that not only has academic intelligence, but also has a strong, creative character, and is ready to face the dynamics of complex social life.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the implementation of democratic education by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers at MA Al-Ichsan Kulon Progo plays a significant role in the formation of students' creative character. Teachers create a participatory, dialogical, and inclusive learning atmosphere, which encourages students to think critically, express opinions, and work together in solving learning problems. This approach not only focuses on cognitive mastery of religious material, but also on strengthening moral values and social skills that are the foundation for forming creative character. Democratic education implemented by teachers has proven to be able to internalize moral values in students through a reflective and collaborative approach. Students not only understand the values of goodness theoretically, but are also able to feel and apply them in everyday life. The creative characters formed include courage in expressing opinions, the ability to think innovatively and provide solutions, and an open attitude towards differences. Thus, democratic education is a relevant and effective approach in the context of Islamic Religious Education learning to form a generation that is not only intellectually religious, but also has a strong, creative, and adaptive character to ever-evolving social challenges.

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