

STRENGTHENING ISLAMIC CHARACTER EDUCATION IN CHILDREN THROUGH ECO-PEDAGOGICAL LEARNING

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Abstract. In today's educational landscape, the erosion of moral and spiritual values among children highlights an urgent need for an integrative approach to character education. Islamic character education offers a strong moral foundation rooted in divine teachings, while eco-pedagogical learning encourages awareness, responsibility, and care for the environment. This study aims to examine how eco-pedagogical principles can be integrated into Islamic character education to foster children's holistic moral development. Through a structured analysis of classical Islamic teachings and contemporary educational theories, the study identifies core values such as trustworthiness (*amanah*), responsibility (*mas'uliyah*), and stewardship (*khalifah*) as central to both Islamic and ecological paradigms. The integration of eco-pedagogy into Islamic education encourages experiential learning methods—such as nature-based activities and reflection on environmental ethics—that align with Islamic worldviews. These strategies not only enrich moral understanding but also cultivate empathy toward living beings and the natural world. The study underscores the potential of eco-pedagogical learning as a transformative medium for instilling Islamic ethical values in children from an early age. It offers conceptual insights for educators and curriculum developers seeking to merge religious values with sustainability education in a culturally relevant framework.

Keywords: Islamic Character, Eco-pedagogy, Children Education, Environmental Ethics, Moral Development, Islamic Education

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, educators and policymakers have become increasingly concerned about the erosion of moral values among children, which is often attributed to the growing influence of digital media, materialistic culture, and the weakening of religious education. According to Whiting and Konstantakos (2019), the loss of spiritual grounding in youth presents serious challenges to moral development, especially in pluralistic societies where religious ethics are often marginalized. This condition highlights the urgency of reaffirming character education—not merely as behavioral training, but as a spiritual and ethical formation rooted in religious traditions.

In the Islamic context, character education (*tarbiyah akhlaqiyyah*) is considered a central pillar of holistic education. Islamic teachings emphasize virtues such as *amanah* (trust), *shiddiq* (honesty), *tabligh* (responsibility), and *fathanah* (wisdom), which are vital for forming morally upright individuals (Kurniawan, Firdaus, & Nafia, 2024). However, traditional approaches to Islamic education have often neglected the environmental and contextual dimensions of learning, thereby limiting children's engagement with real-world ethical concerns such as sustainability, empathy toward nature, and ecological stewardship.

This gap has led to the rise of eco-pedagogy, a critical educational philosophy that promotes environmental ethics, sustainability, and planetary citizenship through transformative learning (Papastephanou, 2021). Eco-pedagogy aligns with Paulo Freire's emancipatory model of education, emphasizing that learners should become critical agents of ecological change rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Yet, few studies have explored how Islamic values and eco-pedagogical approaches can be integrated effectively in early childhood education.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Islamic character education can be enriched through eco-pedagogical learning. Using a qualitative approach through library research, it analyzes Qur'anic values, classical Islamic educational texts, and contemporary eco-pedagogical frameworks. The purpose is to develop a conceptual integration that supports children's moral development and environmental awareness simultaneously. This framework contributes to the ongoing discourse in religious pedagogy and sustainable education, offering practical implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in Islamic learning institutions.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the library research method, which focuses on collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data from a range of textual sources. The research process involves systematically reviewing relevant literature, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and theoretical essays that discuss Islamic character education, child development, and eco-pedagogy. According to Zed (2008), library research emphasizes conceptual analysis and theoretical reflection using documented information rather than empirical field data.

The sources were selected using several criteria: (1) relevance to the intersection of Islamic education and ecological pedagogy, (2) scholarly authority, such as works published in Scopus-indexed or DOAJ-listed journals, and (3) recency, with a focus on literature published within the last ten years, while also considering classical Islamic texts as foundational references. Key sources include *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (2000) for eco-pedagogical philosophy, and contemporary Islamic education research from journals such as *Al Ibtida* and *Education Sciences*. The data analysis technique applied was content analysis, involving identifying key themes, comparing frameworks, and synthesizing concepts into a coherent theoretical integration (Krippendorff, 2013). Interpretive analysis was also used to relate Islamic values such as *khalifah*, *amanah*, and *rahmah* to eco-pedagogical practices, enabling a reflective reconstruction of character education models for children

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. The Concept of Islamic Character Education

Islamic character education (*tarbiyah akhlakiyyah*) is a fundamental dimension of Islamic pedagogy aimed at shaping individuals who embody moral excellence (*akhlāq al-karimah*) in all aspects of life. Unlike secular character education, which may focus on social values without metaphysical grounding, Islamic character formation is anchored in divine revelation—the Qur'an and Sunnah—and further elaborated through classical Islamic scholarship (*tafsir*, *sirah*, and *usul al-akhlāq*). The Qur'an itself highlights that the mission of Prophet Muhammad is to perfect human character:

“Indeed, you are of a great moral character”
(Q.S. Al-Qalam: 4).

This verse is frequently cited as a theological basis for making *akhlāq* central in the education of Muslim children (Amaliati & Rusydiyah, 2024). Other verses, such as Q.S. Luqman: 12–19, illustrate how a father advises his son with moral, ethical, and theological wisdom—emphasizing values such as *shukr* (gratitude), *tawadhu* (humility), *sabr* (patience), and *adl* (justice).

According to Al-Ghazali's model of *tazkiyah an-nafs* (soul purification), human behavior must be continuously disciplined and refined to align with divine virtues. Education, therefore, is not merely an academic endeavor, but a spiritual

and ethical training that touches the heart (*qalb*), the intellect (*'aql*), and the behavior (*amal*) (Kurniawan, Firdaus, & Nafia, 2024). Islamic character development emphasizes internalization (*tathbiq*), not just memorization or imitation. The primary values emphasized in Islamic character education include:

1. Amanah (Trustworthiness): fulfilling responsibilities sincerely
2. Tanggung Jawab (Accountability): both personal and social responsibility (*mas'uliyah*)
3. Tawakal (Reliance on God): entrusting outcomes to Allah after striving
4. Disiplin (Self-control): following divine boundaries consistently
5. Ihsan (Excellence): doing good beyond obligation, as if "seeing God" (Hadith Jibril)
6. Sidiq (Truthfulness): honesty in word and action

Importantly, these values are not abstract ideals—they are expected to manifest in daily behavior, interactions with others, and attitudes toward the environment. Prophet Muhammad's *sirah* (biography) is filled with practical examples of honesty, compassion, moderation, and ecological concern, such as his prohibitions against cutting trees without necessity and his instructions to conserve water even when performing ablution in a river (Papastephanou, 2021; Al-Ibtida, 2024).

Character education in the Islamic framework is also deeply teleological—its purpose is not only to produce ethical citizens but to form righteous servants of God (*abid*) and vicegerents on Earth (*khalifah fil-ardh*) (Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 30). This perspective naturally lays the groundwork for integrating environmental ethics, which will be explored in the following sub-sections.

B. Understanding Eco-pedagogy in Educational Practice

Eco-pedagogy emerged as a transformative educational approach rooted in the work of Paulo Freire, whose concept of *critical pedagogy* emphasized liberation through critical consciousness (*conscientizacao*) and dialogic learning (Freire, 2000). In response to global ecological crises and the alienation of learners from nature, eco-pedagogy expands Freire's vision by incorporating environmental justice, ecological literacy, and sustainability ethics into the educational process. It frames education not merely as a means of knowledge transfer but as a political and ethical commitment to both humanity and the planet (Saifulloh & Retnaningyah, 2025).

Eco-pedagogy views the learner as an agent of ecological change, not a passive recipient. According to Peñalver & Rodriguez (2021), eco-pedagogical education cultivates a worldview in which learners critically analyze systems of environmental destruction—such as consumerism and industrialism—and develop empathy toward the Earth and all living beings. This approach challenges the dominance of anthropocentrism and encourages relational thinking, promoting the idea that humans are part of, not separate from, the ecological web of life.

In practical terms, eco-pedagogy manifests through experiential and nature-based learning, environmental storytelling, and interdisciplinary approaches that connect science, ethics, and spirituality. For example, outdoor activities such as gardening, environmental observation, and ecological journaling enable students to develop ecological sensitivity while reflecting critically on their roles in sustaining life (Ruiz Peñalver et al., 2021). These strategies foster universal values like:

1. Ecological responsibility: understanding and acting upon one's duty to care for the Earth.
2. Empathy: cultivating compassion for all life forms and future generations.
3. Sustainability: adopting behaviors and mindsets that ensure the longevity of ecosystems.

Importantly, eco-pedagogy is not ideologically neutral—it challenges structural inequalities that degrade both human dignity and ecological systems. It is a pedagogy of resistance against ecological illiteracy and capitalist exploitation, making it especially relevant in education systems that seek to integrate justice, spirituality, and sustainability (Korsant, 2022). This makes eco-pedagogy a powerful and compatible partner to Islamic educational goals, which also emphasize stewardship (*khalifah*), moderation (*wasathiyyah*), and mercy (*rahmah*) toward all creation—setting the stage for integration, discussed in the next section.

C. Integration of Islamic Values and Eco-pedagogy

The integration of Islamic values with eco-pedagogy is not merely conceptual—it is essential and practical in addressing both spiritual and ecological crises among younger generations. In Islam, humans are regarded as *khalifah fi al-ardh* (vicegerents on Earth), a theological construct derived from Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 30, which implies responsibility, trust, and ethical governance over natural resources. These values—*khalifah* (stewardship), *amanah* (trust), and *rahmah* (compassion)—are part of a holistic Islamic worldview that aligns strongly with eco-pedagogical goals of environmental ethics and sustainability education (Basri, Adnan, & Widiastuty, 2025).

According to Freire (2000), eco-pedagogy is an extension of critical pedagogy that incorporates environmental awareness into a transformative educational approach. Freire emphasized the need for learners to become critically aware of the injustices in both human and ecological systems, advocating for a pedagogy that empowers students to become agents of ecological justice. Islamic education shares this transformative aim by encouraging learners to develop spiritual consciousness (*taqwa*) and moral action based on divine revelation.

Recent studies illustrate practical ways to integrate Islamic character values and eco-pedagogical approaches. A case study by Kurniawan, Firdaus, and Nafia (2024) at Darul Huffadz Primary School demonstrated that integrating environmental learning into Islamic education significantly increased students' moral sensitivity and environmental responsibility. In that study, Islamic virtues such as *amanah*, *syukur*, and *rahmah* were explicitly linked to hands-on

environmental activities such as school gardening, waste management, and reflective Qur'anic storytelling. For example, in gardening lessons, students were guided to reflect on Q.S. Al-An'am: 99:

“And it is He who sends down rain from the sky,
and We produce thereby the growth of all things...”

This was followed by observation activities, planting, and care of plants. Teachers then facilitated discussions relating the growth cycle to the signs of God in nature (*ayat kauniyyah*), teaching that caring for plants is part of the Islamic duty to maintain balance on Earth (*mizan*) (Kurniawan et al., 2024). Other effective strategies include:

1. Islamic storytelling sessions about the Prophet Muhammad's compassion for animals and moderation in consumption.
2. Poster-making and journaling about Qur'anic verses on creation, paired with recycling or conservation projects.
3. Thematic integration between Islamic Studies, Natural Sciences, and Civic Education, emphasizing unity of knowledge (*tawhidic paradigm*).

This integrated approach fosters the development of students who are both morally grounded and ecologically literate—a dual competency crucial for the 21st century. Moreover, it aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.7), which advocate for education that fosters respect for cultural diversity, environmental sustainability, and global citizenship. Therefore, the synthesis of Islamic educational values and eco-pedagogy should be viewed not as a novelty but as a necessity. It provides a faith-based ethical foundation for environmental education, making it more relevant and meaningful for Muslim learners and communities.

D. Strategies for Implementing Eco-Islamic Character Education

The implementation of Eco-Islamic Character Education in early childhood (PAUD) and primary education (SD) requires pedagogical strategies that integrate Islamic values—such as *khalifah* (stewardship), *amanah* (responsibility), and *rahmah* (compassion)—with eco-pedagogical principles rooted in environmental literacy, hands-on engagement, and spiritual reflection. These strategies should be adapted to learners' developmental stages, using storytelling, nature-based observation, and creative project-based learning, while also involving teachers and families as co-educators.

Implementing Eco-Islamic Character Education at PAUD / SD Level

Implementing eco-Islamic character education at the early childhood and primary school levels involves pedagogical strategies tailored to the psychological and spiritual development of young learners. Children at this stage are in what Piaget (1972) describes as the *preoperational* and *concrete operational* stages of development. They learn best through visual, hands-on, and emotionally engaging experiences. Therefore, the most effective educational strategies are those that stimulate imagination, allow

exploration, and foster direct connection between abstract Islamic values and tangible environmental practices.

a. Islamic Storytelling (Qissah Islamiyyah) as Moral and Ecological Transmission

Storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool in both Islamic and environmental education. Within Islamic tradition, stories (*qashash*) of prophets and nature are frequently used in the Qur'an to guide moral behavior and spiritual reflection (Q.S. Yusuf: 111). When adapted for early learners, these stories help connect religious principles with environmental responsibility. Examples of Eco-Islamic storytelling include:

- The Hadith of the thirsty dog: A man was forgiven by Allah for giving water to a thirsty dog (Sahih Bukhari, Hadith no. 2363). This story is used to teach *rahmah* (compassion), even toward non-human creatures.
- Prophet Sulaiman and the Ants (Q.S. An-Naml: 18–19): This story teaches respect for all life and awareness of human impact on ecosystems.
- Qur'anic descriptions of plant growth and rain (Q.S. Al-An'am: 99): Used to cultivate gratitude (*shukr*) and appreciation of Allah's signs in nature (*ayat kauniyyah*).

Research by Kurniawan et al. (2024) shows that when children listen to and reflect on these stories, they develop stronger emotional bonds with nature, and are more likely to exhibit empathetic behavior toward animals, plants, and the environment.

"Storytelling becomes a bridge that connects sacred teachings with everyday environmental practice" (Amaliati & Rusydiyah, 2024, p. 65).

To enhance the storytelling process:

- Visual aids (puppets, storybooks with illustrations) are used.
- Role-playing and dramatization reinforce character understanding.
- Reflections and questions like "What would you do if you saw a thirsty animal?" help personalize the message.

b. Nature Observation and Eco-Gardening

Observation-based learning is core to eco-pedagogy. According to Freire (2000), true education begins when learners engage with reality, not when they memorize facts. For Islamic eco-education, this means connecting the act of observing nature with spiritual reflection. Practical school activities include:

- Leaf and flower collection: followed by classroom discussions about Allah's creation and verses from the Qur'an (Q.S. Ar-Rahman: 10–12).
- Weather and water observation journals: paired with teachings about water as an *amanah* (trust) that must not be wasted.
- Gardening projects: planting vegetables or flowers while reciting short du'a' and discussing verses about sustenance (Q.S. Abasa: 24–32).

In Darul Huffadz Elementary School, such gardening activities are integrated with daily moral lessons, allowing children to physically experience the responsibility of being *khalifah* (Kurniawan et al., 2024).

"Children begin to see themselves as caretakers of the Earth when they are given the space to nurture life" (Basri et al., 2025, p. 6).

c. Creative Project-Based Learning (PjBL) with Islamic-Ecological Themes

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) gives children the opportunity to explore, create, and express, while aligning with values of sustainability and Islamic ethics. When designed thoughtfully, projects can cultivate:

- Critical thinking,
- Collaboration,
- Value reflection.

Examples of eco-Islamic projects:

- Poster Creation: Children design posters on topics like "I am a Steward of the Earth" or "Allah Loves Clean Places", integrating Qur'anic verses.
- Upcycled Art: Children use plastic waste to create Islamic symbols (e.g., trees with Arabic calligraphy), promoting reuse and creativity.
- Classroom campaigns: For example, "Water is a Trust", where students monitor classroom water use and present reflections on *amanah* and *shukr*.

Saifulloh & Retnaningyah (2025) emphasize that such learning fosters not only knowledge but also moral agency—children understand *why* and *how* to act responsibly, based on their faith and their role in the environment.

The Role of Teachers and the School Environment in Implementing Eco-Islamic Character Education

Teachers and schools play a central and transformative role in realizing the integration of Islamic character education and eco-pedagogical principles. Within this framework, the educator is not merely a transmitter of knowledge but a moral exemplar, environmental facilitator, and architect of learning experiences that combine spiritual values with ecological responsibility (Freire, 2000; Basri et al., 2025). In early childhood and primary settings, students learn most effectively through modelling and habituation, making the ethical consistency of teachers and the learning environment pivotal in shaping both character and environmental behavior.

a. Teacher as Role Model: Living the Values of Amanah, Rahmah, and Khalifah

Islamic tradition emphasizes the role of teachers (*murabbi*) as moral guides (*uswah hasanah*). In the context of eco-Islamic education, this means that educators must embody environmental ethics through daily actions:

- Turning off unused lights and water taps,
- Using reusable teaching materials,
- Treating school grounds and plants with respect,
- Beginning lessons with reflections on nature-based Qur'anic verses.

According to Kurniawan et al. (2024), students at Darul Huffadz Primary School demonstrated stronger environmental habits when teachers modeled sustainable behavior consistently—such as using refillable bottles, bringing eco-friendly lunch packaging, or praying before planting activities.

"Teachers become living Qur'ans for children, showing that faith is not only practiced in prayer, but in how we treat the Earth" (Basri et al., 2025, p. 6).

Moreover, Freire (2000) advocates dialogical pedagogy, in which educators engage students in reflective conversations. In eco-Islamic learning, this dialogue may involve:

- Discussing Qur'anic verses related to creation (Q.S. Ar-Rum: 41),
 - Reflecting on environmental problems in the local community,
 - Asking questions like: "How would the Prophet treat this place?"
- b. Curriculum Integration and Thematic Islamic-Ecological Learning

To ensure consistency and depth, Islamic character values and ecological literacy must be integrated across the curriculum. This approach is consistent with Indonesia's 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*), which encourages thematic and holistic learning at the elementary level. Practical integration strategies include:

- In PAI (Islamic Education): Teaching the concept of *khalifah* alongside environmental care as *ibadah*.
- In IPA (Science): Studying ecosystems while linking them with the verse *"Do not cause mischief on Earth"* (Q.S. Al-A'raf: 56).
- In Bahasa Indonesia: Writing short reflections or creating poems on "My Garden, My Trust (Amanah)".

Amaliati & Rusydiyah (2024) emphasize that such integration not only improves learning retention but also fosters emotional engagement and faith-based action.

c. Green and Spiritually Rich Learning Environments

The physical and cultural environment of the school should reflect Islamic ecological ethics. This includes:

- Green School Areas: Gardens labeled with verses of the Qur'an, such as Q.S. Ar-Rahman: 10–12, serve both educational and spiritual functions.
- Eco-Corners: Classrooms with eco-banners, plant corners, and posters about Islamic duties toward nature.
- Waste Reduction Systems: Teaching *taharah* (cleanliness) alongside waste sorting reinforces both religious and ecological values.

Kurniawan et al. (2024) found that students who learned in green Islamic school settings not only performed better in science and religion subjects but also displayed more eco-conscious habits such as picking up trash and reminding peers to save water.

d. Teacher Training and Institutional Support

Teachers must also be equipped and supported through professional development. This includes:

- Workshops on eco-Islamic pedagogy,
- Collaborations with pesantren and environmental NGOs,
- Internal school policies promoting eco-Islamic learning themes (e.g., "Clean Friday with Faith").

Schools must build a culture of sustainability as part of Islamic practice, ensuring alignment between institutional

vision and classroom instruction (Basri et al., 2025; Juras, 2023).

The Role of Parents in Reinforcing Eco-Islamic Character Education

The success of Eco-Islamic Character Education does not rely solely on schools or teachers. Parental involvement is a foundational element in reinforcing the values of *khalifah*, *amanah*, and *rahmah* learned at school. The family, as the first and most enduring learning environment, profoundly influences a child's worldview, habits, and character development (Alfiyanto et al., 2024).

Islamic teachings have long emphasized the parent's role in character formation. The Prophet Muhammad SAW said, *"Every child is born upon fitrah (natural disposition); it is his parents who make him Jewish, Christian, or Magian"* (HR. Bukhari, no. 1385).

a. Eco-Faithful Home Routines

Parents can reinforce Islamic environmental ethics through daily home practices, such as:

- Turning off water while brushing teeth while saying, *"Water is amanah from Allah."*
- Gardening as a family activity, while reciting verses about creation (e.g., Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 22).
- Composting or recycling while reminding children of the hadith, *"Cleanliness is half of faith"* (HR. Muslim, no. 223).

These habits build a strong emotional and spiritual association between faith and ecological responsibility (Pandia & Naim, 2023).

b. Islamic Story Sharing and Discussion

Parents are also encouraged to engage in faith-based storytelling at home. According to Ibrahim et al. (2024), moral storytelling sessions shared by parents before bedtime significantly enhance children's spiritual empathy and ecological awareness. For instance:

- Reading the story of Prophet Nuh AS and the flood to teach about nature's balance.
- Discussing Prophet Muhammad's care for trees and animals.
- Linking environmental degradation with the verse *"Corruption has appeared on land and sea..."* (Q.S. Ar-Rum: 41).

Such reflective storytelling extends the school's learning into the home, creating consistency in values.

c. Parent-School Partnership in Eco-Projects

An effective strategy is establishing school-home eco collaborations, such as:

- Eco-Family Day: where students and parents plant trees or clean riverbanks together.
- Environmental Pledges: signed by both parents and children, committing to specific actions like no littering, saving electricity, or reducing plastic.
- Home Journaling: students reflect in writing about nature-related activities they do at home with parents, often paired with Qur'anic insights.

According to Masturin (2025), such participatory approaches result in higher behavioral consistency and create

a sense of collective spiritual accountability between school, child, and parent.

d. Role Modeling and Moral Reinforcement

Parents must act as moral models, as children tend to imitate adult behavior more than respond to instructions (Bandura, 1986). Warsah et al. (2024) emphasize that when parents model eco-conscious behavior infused with Islamic values—such as gratitude, patience in gardening, or speaking kindly about animals—children naturally reflect these behaviors both in school and social environments.

“Parental actions are mirrors in which children form their beliefs. Islamic values must be lived, not just preached” (Alfiyanto et al., 2024, p. 41)

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that the integration of Islamic character education with eco-pedagogical principles offers a transformative model for nurturing moral and ecological consciousness among children at the PAUD and primary school levels. Through strategies such as Islamic storytelling, nature-based learning, and creative project-based activities, students develop core values of khalifah (stewardship), amanah (responsibility), and rahmah (compassion) in both spiritual and practical dimensions. The findings highlight that teachers, as ethical role models, and parents, as value reinforcers at home, play essential roles in ensuring the consistency of moral formation across educational spaces. Moreover, eco-Islamic character education addresses urgent global concerns by fostering sustainability within the framework of faith. As such, its implementation should be expanded and institutionalized in both formal and informal education systems. Future research is encouraged to explore empirical models, assessment tools, and interfaith applications of eco-pedagogical values in Islamic education to strengthen its impact across broader educational and socio-cultural contexts.

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