



## ***Back to Surau*: Redefining Early Childhood Character Education Through the Lens of Minangkabau Culture**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This study aims to explain the rationale behind the "*Back to Surau*" research, particularly the importance of the *surau*-based approach in early childhood character education. The study is motivated by concerns over the degradation of children's moral values and the belief that re-establishing the *surau* as a center for character education can strengthen moral and noble values in early childhood.

**Design/methods/approach** – This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of Quran teachers, parents, and community leaders in integrating *surau* values into early childhood character education. A total of 23 purposively selected participants were involved, including 5 Quran teachers, 6 parents, 2 traditional or religious leaders, and 10 early childhood children (through observation). Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, participatory observation at four selected *surau*s (two in regency areas and two in urban settings), and document analysis. Thematic analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework—data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing—while van Manen's phenomenological principles guided the interpretation. Research ethics were maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity.

**Findings** – Six major themes emerged. First, the *surau* functions as a center of moral and spiritual learning for young children. Second, community involvement and local culture in the *surau* enrich character education. Third, integrating religious values and local wisdom into daily activities is effective in shaping positive character. Fourth, meaningful learning experiences in the *surau* foster empathy, discipline, and responsibility. Fifth, support from families and *surau* management is a key success factor for this approach. Sixth, challenges such as time constraints and modern lifestyles must be addressed when adapting *surau* values to the formal education context.

**Research implications/limitations** – This study is limited to a specific cultural community (Minangkabau), limiting the generalizability of the results. However, the findings provide insights into the potential of local wisdom as a character education strategy.

**Practical implications** – This study encourages early childhood educators and policymakers to integrate *surau*-based approaches into curricula and school activities. This approach can serve as a model for character building through collaboration among schools, families, and communities.

**Originality/value** – This research is original in reviving the role of the *surau* and Minangkabau local wisdom in early childhood education. Its novelty lies in integrating a local traditional institution with modern educational practices to strengthen the character of the young generation.

**Keywords** Character education, Early childhood, Local wisdom, Islamic education

**Paper type** Research paper

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## 1. Introduction

The character crisis among Indonesia's younger generation—manifested in declining respect for parents, low social empathy, and deviant behavior—has become a critical concern within the education system. Rapid technological advancement, including early exposure to smartphones, often introduces children to inappropriate content, which negatively influences their behavior and social attitudes. These conditions highlight the urgent need for substantial, value-oriented educational interventions that foster holistic personality development. As emphasized by Karimah et al., Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a pivotal role in shaping children's moral and religious values, especially during the golden age of personality formation (Karimah et al., 2023). This period is foundational for establishing an individual's moral compass and identity. Amanah et al., reinforces that behaviors and attitudes cultivated at this stage are key determinants of future life success (Amanah et al., 2025). From an Islamic perspective, character (*akhlak*) is central to human identity, with noble morals being its essence, as reflected in Q.S Al-Hujurat verse 13: the most honorable person is the most pious, not the wealthiest or most privileged.

Although the need for character education is increasingly urgent, its implementation in many early childhood education settings remains formalistic, fragmented, and disconnected from children's everyday experiences. Such approaches often lack contextual relevance and are ineffective in fostering long-lasting behavioral development. What is required is a model of character education grounded in daily life and cultural authenticity (Birhan et al., 2021; Fertiliana Dea et al., 2020; Mei-Ju et al., 2014; Sakti et al., 2024). Historically, local institutions such as the *surau* have played a significant role in nurturing moral and spiritual development, particularly within Minangkabau and Malay communities. The *surau* served not only as a site for religious learning but also as a communal environment where values like honesty, responsibility, and cooperation were practiced and internalized through lived experience. This culturally embedded and experience-based approach to education has shown strong potential in supporting children's moral and social development (A'yun et al., 2024; Ayuni et al., 2025; Inhorn et al., 2020; Yuliana & Busyro Karim, 2024).

Revitalizing the educational function of the *surau* is not a form of nostalgia, but a strategic effort to reconnect education with indigenous cultural values. Although numerous studies have explored the role of local wisdom in education, few have specifically examined how the *surau* can be re-contextualized within contemporary early childhood education settings. This reveals a significant gap in the literature. Research by Saputri et al. suggest that the philosophical and pedagogical principles embedded in *surau* culture align closely with the spiritual, emotional, and social learning goals of ECE (Saputri et al., 2022b). Yet, in practice, most *surau* today are limited to serving as places of worship or Quranic literacy, with their broader educational functions largely diminished.

To bridge this gap, a phenomenological approach can be employed to explore how *surau* values are currently interpreted and implemented by teachers, parents, and community leaders. Reclaiming indigenous educational practices is a decolonizing act that restores local agency in shaping educational paradigms (Karimah et al., 2023; Kusumawati et al., 2024a). Moreover, character education should be integrated holistically from early childhood, combining civic, religious, and emotional dimensions. They advocate fostering integrity through this integration, while Karimah et al. present it as a response to the moral disruption in Society 5.0 (Karimah et al., 2023). Emotional intelligence plays a key role in strengthening character formation (Gignac & Schlegel, 2025; Kamboj & Garg, 2021; Khilmiyah & Wiyono, 2021; Yuan et al., 2025), while adaptive yet value-driven education is essential during transitional periods such as the post-pandemic "new normal" (Fitri & Abdul Latif, 2021).

Several scholars highlight the value of embedding sociocultural and religious elements in ECE curricula. Role-playing based on Qur'anic narratives effectively supports moral learning in tangible ways (Cholimah et al., 2024; Safitri & Aziz, 2019; Tiwuk et al., 2025). Islamic character education fosters moral resilience during crises, while daily routines serve as effective channels for instilling values such as honesty and compassion (Saputri et al., 2022b). Kusumawati et al. recommend integrating character education into the core curriculum rather than treating it as an

add-on (Kusumawati et al., 2024a). Ismail and Solihin et al. emphasize the transmission of noble morals through modeling in Islamic education (Ismail, 2016; Solihin et al., 2020). Others, like Mansur and Sholeh, demonstrate how local wisdom can enrich character education through contextual learning experiences (Mansur & Sholeh, 2024).

Furthermore, initiatives such as "Cultured Thursday" (Arif et al., 2023) and spiritually guided leadership (Siswanto, 2022) reflect innovative efforts to embed cultural and religious values within school ecosystems. Community-based educational practices such as collective dhikr (Rukmana et al., 2024) and traditional storytelling (Basyar et al., 2020) offer additional frameworks for holistic character development. Islamic education strengthens personal integrity while shaping national character (Mintarsih Danumiharja et al., 2023; Muhtifah, 2016; Yumnah, 2021). By drawing on classical texts such as *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim*, educators can instill discipline and moral seriousness from early childhood (Laili et al., 2022).

Historically, the *surau* during the Prophet Muhammad's time functioned as multifunctional centers of religious, educational, and communal life. Revisiting this historical model reveals untapped potential for modern ECE, especially when aligned with contemporary curricula like the Merdeka Curriculum, which encourages context-based character education. However, persistent challenges remain in implementing quality character education, including limited teacher support and overly formal religious instruction that neglects the spiritual essence.

Recent research highlights the renewed potential of *surau*-based education. *Surau* activities cultivate values such as honesty and solidarity through experiential learning, which can be integrated into early childhood education through project-based or social learning approaches (Febriani et al., 2023; Sabri et al., 2022a). Syaifullah et al. highlight how *Surau* Godang enhances children's religious literacy within an integrative educational model (Al Syaifullah et al., 2024). The *surau* is seen as an inspirational precursor to modern madrasahs. This points to a promising yet underexplored direction: integrating *surau* values into early childhood education through culturally grounded practices such as storytelling, rituals, and community engagement.

In sum, while there is extensive literature on character education and local wisdom, there remains a notable lack of focused research on how the *surau*, as a culturally rich institution, can be revitalized and adapted within modern early childhood education frameworks. This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experiences of stakeholders in implementing *surau*-based values in ECE, offering a culturally responsive approach to character formation in early learning settings.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to explore and interpret the lived experiences and meanings constructed by teachers, parents, and community leaders regarding *surau*-based character education. This design is suitable for revealing a deep subjective understanding embedded in the context of local Minangkabau culture which is based on the noble values of Islam in education carried out in the *surau*. The framework ensures coherence between the research objectives and the methodological tools used to address them.

### 2.2. Participants

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases relevant to the study's objectives. The selection criteria were as shown in Table 1. This purposive strategy ensures that data is collected from those most directly involved in or impacted by *surau*-based educational practices. These participants included early childhood educators, religious leaders, parents, and community members who actively participate in or facilitate children's activities in the *surau*. Their insights are crucial for understanding how traditional religious settings influence character education and how these practices are adapted to suit young learners in contemporary contexts.

Table 1. Participants criteria

No.	Sample	Sample Criteria
1.	Koran Reading Teachers (5 participants)	who actively integrate <i>surau</i> -based values into their teaching
2.	Parents (6 participants)	Parents early childhood learners involved in <i>surau</i> -based religious education
3.	Traditional/Religious Leaders (2 participants)	Who engaged in early childhood character development
4.	Early Childhood Children (10 participants)	Early Childhood Children who were observed during religious and social learning activities.

### 2.3. Data Collection

Data collection were gathered using multiple qualitative techniques to allow triangulation and enhance trustworthiness: (1) Semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, and religious leaders to gain insights into their perspectives and experiences; (2) Participant observation conducted in *surau* and ECE institutions where *surau*-based values are implemented, capturing real-time interactions and practices; (3) Documentation analysis, including field notes, religious learning materials, and records of children's participation in *surau*-based activities.

The interview guide was developed based on Lickona's theory of character education (moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action) and infused with Minangkabau local wisdom. An observation sheet was also employed to systematically record the presence and modeling of character values. To ensure ethical integrity, participants were provided with informed consent forms, their identities were kept confidential, and all data collection adhered to local cultural norms and sensitivities.

### 2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis followed the Thematic Analysis model as outlined by (Miles et al., 2014, 2020; Miles & Huberman, 1994), involving three core stages: (1) Data Reduction – Filtering raw data to select relevant information in alignment with research focus; (2) Data Display – Organizing selected data into structured formats such as matrices or tables, including relationship patterns among participant responses; (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification – Interpreting data through coding and thematic categorization, and verifying findings through triangulation and member checks to ensure credibility.

The coding process involved open coding followed by thematic grouping, aligned with van Manen's phenomenological reflection, to uncover the essence and contextual meaning of participants' experiences. Data validity was ensured through Triangulation of data sources and collection techniques, and Member checking to confirm the accuracy of interpretations with participants.

To maintain clarity and ensure the anonymity of participants during data analysis, each respondent was assigned a specific code. This coding system helps protect individual identities while allowing for accurate interpretation of the research findings. The codes were assigned based on the respondents' roles within the research context. The details of the respondent codes are presented in table 2 below. This coding system allowed for systematic organization of responses during the analysis and ensured the traceability of thematic patterns across participant groups.

Table 2. Respondent Codes

No.	Code Responders	Description
1.	RO	Parent Respondents
2.	RG	Teacher Respondents
3.	RA	Child Respondents
4.	RP	Traditional Leader Respondents

After the data is collected and given a code, the researcher then reduces the data. Through data reduction, the researcher selects relevant data from the overall rough data to filter out relevant information to the focus of the research. After the data is reduced, the researcher then

presents the data. The presentation of data is carried out to compile systematic information from the data obtained, in this case the researcher makes a table about the relationship patterns of the respondents. After the data presentation, the next stage is the drawing of conclusions, in this case the researcher interprets the data obtained from the respondents obtained through data reduction and data presentation through triangulation results.

### 3. Result

This research aims to explore the meaning and relevance of the concept of "*returning to surau*" in early childhood character education. Based on interviews with 20 respondents (ECE teachers, children, parents, and traditional leaders), six main themes were found: (1) understanding of character education, (2) important character values according to respondents, (3) the role of *surau* in past education, (4) character values taught in *surau*, (5) the implementation of *surau* values in the context of early childhood education, and (6) challenges and expectations for the future. The results and discussion of the 6 aspects can be seen as follows:

#### 3.1 Understanding of character education

Respondents understand character education as a process of habituating good values that can shape a child's personality as a whole. In the context of early childhood, character is seen as an important foundation in shaping children's attitudes, behaviors, and mindsets. This is in accordance with the respondent's response that "*Character education guides children to know what is right and wrong from an early age*" (RO.2- 1,2,12,13). The statement is also clarified by the respondent's response that "*Children's character must be instilled from an early age so that they have a strong moral foundation*" (RO- 7,8,11,18). Related to the moral foundation, there is a response from the respondents with the values that "*Character education is the process of accustoming children to do good and responsible, honest, disciplined and caring*" (RO.2-3,4,5,6,9,10,14,15,16,17,19,20). This is confirmed by (Lickona, 2012), which states that character education includes moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action which should be started early. Example and habituation are the two main ways used by teachers and parents in instilling these values. In the golden age, children absorb information and grades very quickly, so character education is a must in the early childhood education system.

#### 3.2 Important character values according to respondents

The character values that respondents considered most important included good manners, honesty, and responsibility. These values are considered the basis of healthy and harmonious social relations in the future. Parent respondents view that a polite child will be respected by the surrounding environment, while honesty is the basis of trust in social relationships. The value of responsibility is considered important to foster independence from an early age, so that children can understand the consequences of their actions. Furthermore, according to traditional leaders, the value of character can be strengthened through activities in the *surau* contained in the following interview excerpts. *The value of shame, respect for parents, deliberation, and mutual cooperation. All of this can be habituated through activities at the surau, such as studying together and community service work cleaning the surau*" (RP-3). These findings are in line with the results of the study (Saputri et al., 2022a), which emphasizes that moral values instilled from an early age will form a stable and positive personality of children.

#### 3.3 The role of surau in past education

The role of *surau* in early childhood education in the past is also an important concern in this study. The *surau* is not only a place of worship, but also serves as a learning space and a center for children's moral development. In Minangkabau culture, *surau* is known as a place where children learn to recite, understand the value of adab, and develop spirituality through interaction with religious and community leaders. This is in accordance with the statements of traditional leaders related to the role of the *surau*. "*Surau is not only a place of worship, but also a place to form children's ethics. Then and now, the surau is still the pillar where we instill the values of the*



*traditional basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*" (RP-1). Adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah is a philosophy of life of the Minangkabau people which means customs based on sharia and sharia based on the book of Allah. In line with this, (Azra, 2012), stated that *surau* plays a role as an informal educational institution that is able to shape the character of adolescents collectively. The presence of *surau*s in the history of Islamic education in Indonesia shows the importance of community-based institutions in building children's values and morals in a sustainable manner.

### 3.4 Character values taught in *surau*

The values taught in the *surau*, according to the respondents, include honesty, manners, mutual cooperation, simplicity, and cleanliness. This is in accordance with the excerpt of the parents' interview, namely *"the values taught, namely recital, noble morals, manners, cooperation, manners, prayer, help-help, cleanliness, being given an understanding of the importance of honesty and patience"* (RO.5-1-20). Activities that support the internalization of these values include reading the Qur'an, listening to the stories of the prophets, as well as devotional work and helping others, which is in accordance with the following excerpt from the children's interview *"the story of the Prophet Ibrahim is very remembered by me"* (RA.7-8). Through interesting activities, children easily remember the meaning presented in learning that is internalized in values. This kind of learning model is contextual and applicable to early childhood. This is in line with the value-based learning approach in Islam as described by Al-Ghazali, which places *adab* as an integral part of the achievement of knowledge. Through hands-on practice and social reinforcement, children learn not only from verbal instruction, but also from concrete life experiences.

### 3.5 Implementation of *surau* values in the context of ECE

The implementation of the concept of *"returning to surau"* in the context of ECE was considered very relevant by the respondents. They suggested integrating *surau* values in early childhood learning through activities such as joint prayers, religious corners, telling prophetic stories, and social activities such as sharing. This is strengthened by the results of the teacher's interview *"I use a dialogical approach. Each child is given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the verse read. I believe that deep understanding cannot be born from memorization alone, but from the process of critical thinking and reflection. Therefore, I also give small tasks such as writing down the meaning of the verse and its relation to daily life"* (RG.3-3). These activities can form a meaningful learning ecosystem, based on local spiritual and cultural values. This reinforces the view (Listiwati et al., 2022), that character learning must be contextualized in children's social reality, so that they are able to internalize values in their entirety. Collaborative activities involving teachers, parents, and religious leaders are also believed to increase the effectiveness of character education in ECE.

### 3.6 Challenges and expectations ahead

Challenges in the implementation of this concept include curriculum limitations, lack of teacher training, and resistance from parents who do not understand the urgency of character education based on local values. This is in accordance with the results of the parents' interviews, namely *"challenges in its implementation are in the form of time constraints and an already dense curriculum load"* (RO.11-2). Some ECE institutions also face facility constraints, such as the unavailability of worship rooms or reflective areas for children. Research by (Kusumawati et al., 2024b), showing that structural and cultural barriers are the main factors that hinder the integration of local values into the education system. Therefore, a collaborative and participatory approach is the key to success, by inviting all elements of society to build a school culture that brings the values of the *surau* to life.

In terms of expectations, the respondents want early childhood education to be able to restore the focus on moral formation, not only on the cognitive aspect. Education rooted in local values and spirituality is believed to produce a generation that is not only academically intelligent, but also morally resilient. Statements such as *"we want children to be more polite and have good morals"* reflect the community's collective aspirations towards the strategic role of early

childhood education. This emphasizes the importance of redefining the goals of early childhood education that is more holistic and humanitarian-oriented. That way, early childhood education is not only a means of knowledge transfer, but also a seedbed for the noble values of the nation. Through learning for children through *surau*, it is hoped that there can also be a balance between the knowledge of the world and the hereafter, which of course is in line with the traditional philosophy of Minangkabau.

The "*return to surau*" approach also enriches the pedagogy of early childhood education with the values of community, mutual cooperation, and spirituality. Community-based education is able to create an environment that supports children's growth and development optimally. According to (Rahiem, 2023a), character education rooted in local spirituality will be more effective in shaping the meaning of life and morality of children. *Surau*, in this case, is not only a symbol of nostalgia, but a living source of learning, inspiring the practice of transformative pedagogy today. Integrating *surau* values in the ECE curriculum can be the answer to the demands of globalization that often erode children's local identity. Through the "*return to surau*" approach, it can also be a foundation for children who are faced with current technological developments, children can be more directed in behaving and choosing spectacle through the guidance they have received.

As shown in table 3, the various forms of early childhood activities conducted in mosques can help instill the 18 character education values as outlined by the Ministry of Education and Culture. These activities are designed to align with the religious atmosphere of the *surau*, while remaining enjoyable and educational for young children. The integration of storytelling, group prayers, simple religious rituals, and moral-themed games provides children with meaningful experiences that nurture both their spiritual and moral development. By participating in these structured yet engaging activities, children begin to internalize values such as honesty, discipline, tolerance, and responsibility in ways that are developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant.

The positive activities mentioned above, if carried out consistently and repeatedly, have the potential to shape strong character in children. Through these experiences, children are not only able to acquire knowledge and develop their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, but they also begin to internalize religious values from an early age. Early exposure to such values increases the likelihood that they become embedded in the child's everyday behavior and decision-making processes. From a pedagogical perspective, this approach aligns with the principles of contextual teaching and learning, which are especially relevant to the developmental characteristics of early childhood. Children learn most effectively when they are actively engaged and emotionally connected to the content being explored. By integrating values that children observe and experience in their immediate surroundings—such as religious practices in the *surau* or the moral guidance of community religious leaders—learning becomes more meaningful, relatable, and enduring. This model also supports Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the vital role of social interaction and cultural context in the learning process. According to this theory, learning is constructed through engagement with more knowledgeable others within a shared cultural framework. In this context, character education transcends rote instruction; it becomes a participatory and holistic process where children actively co-construct understanding within their cultural and community life. Therefore, character formation in early childhood is not simply about teaching moral values, but about living them in meaningful, everyday interactions.

Thus, the findings of this study reinforce that character education in early childhood must be directed toward contextual, spiritual, and community-based strategies. *Surau*, as a traditional institution rich in cultural and moral values, can serve as a model for developing character-based learning approaches in early childhood education. Efforts to revitalize *surau* values in today's educational practices represent a significant step in reconnecting education with local cultural and spiritual foundations. This approach not only strengthens children's moral grounding but also promotes a sense of belonging and identity rooted in their own heritage. Moreover, it serves as a form of educational decolonization—offering culturally relevant alternatives that respond to the challenges of globalization through solutions grounded in national identity. Therefore, the

concept of “*returning to the surau*” is not only timely and relevant but also an urgent call to action for reforming early childhood character education in Indonesia in a way that honors local wisdom and sustains cultural continuity.

Tabel 2. Character Education Values

No.	Value	Description
1.	Religious Character	Participating in congregational prayers, learning daily prayers, getting to know the pillars of Islam and the pillars of faith through songs or pictures.
2.	Honest Character	Plays the role of a "charity box", where the child is asked to tell the truth about the amount of money brought for alms.
3.	Tolerance character	Talk about the importance of respecting different friends (e.g., those who can't read prayers fluently), as well as sharing turns in play.
4.	Discipline Character	Follow the schedule of activities at the mosque (come on time, pray in congregation, sit neatly while listening to children's lectures).
5.	Character of Hard Work	Making Islamic crafts such as wall decorations with prayers written on them, even if it is simple.
6.	Creative character	Coloring calligraphy, making mosque-themed crafts or the month of Ramadan.
7.	Independent character	Take off and put on your own slippers, take your own ablution water with supervision
8.	Democratic character	Choose an Islamic story that you want to listen to together, or choose an Islamic song to sing together
9.	Curiosity character	A simple question and answer after hearing the story of a prophet or Islamic figure (e.g.: "Why did the Prophet Muhammad like to help others?").
10.	Character of the national spirit	Getting to know Indonesian scholars, learning that loving the mosque is also part of the love of the country.
11.	Character of love for the homeland	Hold a small ceremony to commemorate the national day with a joint prayer at the <i>surau</i> .
12.	Character rewards achievements	Giving small rewards to children who diligently come to the <i>surau</i> or memorize daily prayers.
13.	Friendly characters	Play Islamic picture guessing in groups, greeting each other when entering and exiting the <i>surau</i> .
14.	Peace-loving characters	Play without scrambling for toys, learn to resolve small conflicts by apologizing.
15.	Characters who like to read	Reading Islamic stories from children's books in the reading corner of the <i>surau</i> or small library.
16.	Character caring for the environment	Cleaning the mosque yard together, watering plants around the <i>surau</i> .
17.	Social care character	Collecting toys or clothes suitable for use to be donated through activities at the <i>surau</i> .
18.	Character of responsibility	Tidying up prayer mats after prayers, maintaining cleanliness during activities at <i>surau</i> .

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Philosophical Foundations of Character Education in Early Childhood

Character education is a foundational element in early childhood development, particularly in the context of Islamic education. Buya Hamka's educational philosophy offers a compelling framework, emphasizing that education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but a spiritual and moral journey toward becoming "*insan kamil*" complete human being who harmonizes intellect, morality, and spirituality (Mursal, 2023). Education, in this view, aims to achieve happiness in this world and the hereafter by nurturing a child's God-given potential in service to humanity and devotion to Allah. This aligns with the modern Islamic educational



framework, which prioritizes character development as a core educational outcome (Darlan et al., 2021; Jailani, 2023).

For early childhood, character education must be continuous and experiential. It should promote core values such as honesty, empathy, patience, and emotional intelligence (Ding et al., 2023; Hung & Lin, 2025; Kamboj & Garg, 2021; Khilmiyah & Wiyono, 2021). These values cannot be instilled through isolated lessons but require repeated practice and consistent modeling by educators (Utami & Wafi, 2020). Strategies such as storytelling (Suryadi & Akla, 2020), project-based learning (Setyowati et al., 2023), and reflective dialogue allow children to internalize moral lessons in developmentally appropriate ways. Teachers thus play a dual role: as instructional guides and as moral exemplars (Winanjar Rahayu et al., 2023).

#### 4.2. Cultural Integration: Surau as a Site of Character Education

Integrating cultural wisdom into early childhood education enhances the relevance and internalization of moral values. The *surau*, a traditional Minangkabau institution, historically functioned as a hub for spiritual, intellectual, and social development. Rooted in Islamic teachings and local traditions, the *surau* model exemplifies culturally responsive education that blends religious instruction with communal living and character formation (Hasnah et al., 2024).

According to Permendikbud No. 20 of 2018, the five core values of Strengthening Character Education—religiosity, nationalism, integrity, mutual cooperation, and independence—can all be cultivated through *surau*-based practices (Muaddyl Akhyar et al., 2024). For example, the value of religiosity is reinforced through practices such as prayer, Quranic recitation, and learning about *aurat* and modest behavior. Deliberation and collective decision-making foster democratic values and respect for diverse opinions, while communal service teaches cooperation and responsibility. These everyday practices reflect character-building experiences that are grounded in lived realities, echoing both Islamic ethics and Minangkabau philosophy of *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*.

#### 4.3. Historical and Pedagogical Role of the Surau

Historically, the *surau* predates the arrival of Islam in Minangkabau society and evolved as a dynamic space of education, spiritual growth, and social cohesion (Latifa et al., 2021). It served as an early prototype of Islamic educational institutions, where Qur'anic studies were integrated with moral training and communal obligations. The Islamization of the *surau* did not eliminate its indigenous roots; rather, it merged Islamic values with local customs, thus creating a uniquely Minangkabau model of education (Sabri et al., 2022b).

Studies show that the *surau* played a crucial role in shaping children's character through direct engagement in moral activities—such as Quranic study, shared meals, cleaning duties, and respectful social conduct (Iswadi et al., 2021). These practices exemplify the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral behavior—consistent with Lickona's model of character education (Lickona, 2009). By consistently engaging in these practices, children were habituated to values such as honesty, simplicity, cleanliness, and mutual respect (Solihin et al., 2020).

#### 4.4. Recontextualizing Surau Values in Contemporary ECE Practice

Modern early childhood education can benefit from revisiting the pedagogical practices found in traditional *surau*. The teachings of Sheikh Burhanuddin, for instance, emphasized relational pedagogy, where educators act as both mentors and spiritual guides (Susilawati et al., 2014). This teacher-student relationship, based on trust, guidance, and gradual moral development, reflects a holistic approach aligned with the needs of young learners (Bergem, 1990; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008; Paolitto, 1977; Tirri, 2023; Willemse et al., 2008).

In current early childhood settings, this relational model can be implemented through dialogical teaching, project-based learning, and context-based assignments that reflect children's everyday lives. This approach allows for concrete learning experiences where values are not only taught but lived through peer interaction and teacher facilitation. Teachers in this study applied dialogical strategies, encouraging inquiry, discussion, and critical thinking, which in turn

helped children process information meaningfully and develop character through social engagement.

#### 4.5. *Challenges and Future Directions for Reviving Surau-Based Education*

Despite its rich heritage, the role of *surau* in community-based character education is diminishing. Modernization and curricular formalization have led to the marginalization of this traditional institution. Challenges identified in this study include a lack of trained teachers familiar with *surau* pedagogies, limited parental engagement, spatial constraints, and misalignment between national curricula and community-based learning models (Martin-Alguacil et al., 2024; Neupert-Wentz & Müller-Crepon, 2024; Zhou et al., 2024).

However, the reintroduction of *surau* values into ECE is not only possible but also desirable. Parental involvement is crucial in this revitalization, as parent-child interaction forms the first environment where moral values are modeled and internalized (Anisyah et al., 2023). Educators, religious leaders, parents, and policymakers must collaborate to create culturally embedded learning environments. Such environments foster not just knowledge acquisition but the holistic development of a child's identity rooted in religious ethics, communal values, and local wisdom.

#### 4.6. *Research Contribution*

The findings of the *Back to Surau* study offer significant theoretical and practical contributions to the field of early childhood character education. From a theoretical standpoint, this research enriches educational discourse by integrating local cultural values—specifically the *surau* tradition—into models of character education in early childhood settings. The "*back to surau*" approach demonstrates that contextual and community-based character education can complement and deepen prevailing universalist theories, which often overlook the cultural grounding of moral development. This supports Rahiem's assertion that character education rooted in local spirituality tends to be more effective in cultivating moral values in children (Rahiem, 2023b).

Conceptually, the study also contributes to the discourse on the decolonization of education by reaffirming the importance of returning educational practices to indigenous identities and local wisdom amidst the pressures of global standardization. On a practical level, the study offers actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers. The findings highlight the *surau* as a culturally rich, informal learning environment that can serve as a model for collaboration between early childhood institutions and local communities. Activities commonly conducted in the *surau*—such as communal prayer, storytelling of prophetic narratives, and mutual cooperation in cleaning—can be adapted as part of character education programs in early childhood settings.

These insights provide teachers with concrete strategies for designing contextual and culturally responsive learning environments that resonate with children's everyday experiences. Furthermore, the study encourages education policymakers to formally incorporate local wisdom into early childhood curricula and policy frameworks, ensuring that character education is closely aligned with the sociocultural realities of learners. In essence, *Back to Surau* presents a viable model of community-based character education that holds strong potential to enhance the quality and relevance of early childhood education in Indonesia.

#### 4.7. *Limitations*

Despite offering valuable contributions, this study is not without its limitations, which must be critically acknowledged to ensure an accurate interpretation of its findings. First, with regard to cultural context, the research is situated within the specific socio-religious setting of the Minangkabau community, focusing on the local institution of the *surau*. Consequently, the insights generated are highly contextual and closely tied to the Islamic cultural traditions of West Sumatra. Generalizing these findings to other cultural or regional contexts should be approached with caution, as local values and informal institutions elsewhere may take substantially different forms. Therefore, the applicability of the "*back to surau*" model beyond the Minangkabau context requires thoughtful adaptation and contextualization.

Second, the study is limited in terms of methodological scope. As a qualitative inquiry employing a phenomenological approach, the research relies heavily on participants' subjective narratives and the interpretative lens of the researcher. While efforts to ensure validity—such as triangulation—were undertaken, the potential for interpretive bias remains. Participant responses may have been influenced by cultural ideals, leading to the presentation of the *surau* in a more favorable light. Similarly, the researcher's theoretical and cultural positioning may shape data interpretation in subtle ways. The sample size was relatively small (20 participants), and the data collection was confined to a specific time frame, limiting the study's ability to capture broader variations across time or different communities.

Moreover, the study does not include empirical measures of children's observable behavior or direct assessments of the effectiveness of the "*back to surau*" model in shaping character. Instead, the focus is primarily on exploring perceptions, values, and lived experiences. As such, conclusions regarding the long-term impact on children's moral development remain speculative and require further empirical investigation. Recognizing these limitations is essential to appropriately contextualize the findings and to avoid overgeneralization of results beyond the scope of the study.

#### 4.8. Suggestions

In light of the findings and identified limitations, several recommendations are proposed to guide future research and inform practical applications in the field of early childhood character education. From a research perspective, it is advisable to conduct cross-cultural or comparative studies in other regions that possess similar community-based educational institutions—such as *langgar* in Java or *bale banjar* in Bali. Such studies are essential for examining the transferability, relevance, and effectiveness of localized character education models across diverse cultural contexts. Future research could also adopt longitudinal designs or employ mixed-methods approaches to assess the long-term impact of integrating *surau*-based values into early childhood education. For instance, quasi-experimental studies could be designed to embed *surau*-inspired activities into ECE curricula, with behavioral and attitudinal changes among children systematically evaluated in comparison to control groups.

Expanding the range of research participants to include policymakers, curriculum developers, and other stakeholders at the institutional and regional levels would also enrich the understanding of systemic enablers and barriers to implementing such culturally grounded models. This broader scope would offer critical insights into how educational systems can support or hinder the localization of character education.

From a policy and pedagogical standpoint, the findings of this study should serve as a foundation for designing and implementing character education programs that are rooted in community values and local cultural identities. Local governments and early childhood education providers are encouraged to collaborate with traditional leaders, religious figures, and community institutions to recreate the moral and social atmosphere of the *surau* within formal educational environments. One practical initiative could involve organizing a routine "*Surau Visit Day*," allowing ECE learners to engage in value-based learning experiences within actual *surau* settings under the guidance of educators and community leaders.

Additionally, the ECE curriculum can be enriched with local cultural content—such as folklore imbued with moral lessons, traditional games, and collective activities like *gotong royong*—that reflect the character values embodied in *surau* traditions. Teacher professional development must also be prioritized to ensure educators are equipped with the pedagogical competencies necessary for integrating local wisdom into daily instruction. Equally important, supportive education policies are needed from relevant authorities. For example, the inclusion of indicators related to community participation and the reinforcement of spiritual-cultural values in accreditation and evaluation standards could institutionalize this approach within the broader education system. Through such strategic efforts, the vision of a sustainable, community-based model of character education—exemplified by the concept of "*returning to surau*"—can be

actualized, thereby contributing meaningfully to the formation of morally grounded and culturally rooted young learners.

## 5. Conclusion

This study underscores the transformative potential of early childhood education when it is grounded in cultural authenticity and spiritual values. The *Back to the Surau* approach illustrates that character formation in early learners does not always necessitate the invention of novel pedagogical models; rather, it can be effectively realized by revisiting and revitalizing indigenous educational traditions that are deeply embedded in local communities. The *surau*, as demonstrated in the Minangkabau context, represents a holistic learning environment where values such as respect, honesty, discipline, and social responsibility are transmitted through experiential and communal practices—ranging from storytelling and congregational prayer to collaborative tasks.

Beyond its immediate cultural setting, the findings of this study offer broader implications for the global discourse on early childhood character education. In an era increasingly characterized by digitalization and cultural homogenization, this research affirms the importance of culturally responsive and community-based pedagogies. It suggests that integrating local spiritual and moral frameworks into early childhood education can serve as a meaningful counterbalance to the growing detachment between learners and their cultural roots. The *surau*-based model, though specific in form, reflects universal principles of relational, value-laden learning that can be adapted to various sociocultural contexts around the world.

To build upon these insights, future research is encouraged to explore similar models in other cultural settings, conducting cross-regional or comparative studies that assess the transferability and effectiveness of community-rooted character education. Longitudinal and mixed-method approaches would be particularly valuable in capturing the long-term developmental impacts of such interventions. Moreover, further inquiry into policy integration, educator training, and parent-community engagement would enhance the practical viability of localized character education models across diverse educational systems.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for the decolonization of education by re-centering local knowledge systems in pedagogical practice. It highlights the enduring relevance of cultural and spiritual traditions in shaping the moral identity of children—an imperative that is increasingly urgent in a globalized world. By returning to the *surau*, educators and policymakers are not regressing, but rather reclaiming education as a humanizing, value-driven endeavor rooted in the lived realities of children and their communities.

## Declarations

### Author contribution statement

Rina Syafrida conceived the idea. Nancy Riana conducted data collection. Nia Karnia developed the theory digital literacy, cognitive development, and early childhood education. Marzeni Ismail performed the analysis. All authors in discussions regarding the findings and made contributions to the final manuscript.

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The dataset generated and analyzed during the research is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Declaration of interests statement

All authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could influence the work presented in this manuscript.

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