

Problem-Based Learning for Improving Students' Moral Understanding in Islamic Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

Background	Education plays a crucial role in individual and national development; therefore, in Islamic Religious Education, teachers should apply an effective Problem-Based Learning model to ensure students are engaged, comprehend morality, and the learning process is neither monotonous nor boring
Purpose	The objectives of this study are to examine the implementation process of Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education, to evaluate its effectiveness, to identify its advantages in enhancing students' understanding, and to determine its limitations in the learning process.
Research Methodology	This study employed a descriptive qualitative research approach. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and were analyzed using data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing techniques
Result	This study concludes that Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education effectively improves students' understanding of morality by following structured stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation, demonstrating that this learning model is practical, engaging, and significantly enhances students' moral comprehension."
Conclusion	The advantages of Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education lie in its ability to significantly support students' understanding of the material, while its limitations can be anticipated and managed by teachers, ensuring that the learning process remains effective and student-centered.
Keywords	Problem-Based Learning, Students' Morality, Islamic Religious Education



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INTRODUCTION

Students' understanding of moral character is influenced by ethics education integrated into the curriculum, particularly in fields such as engineering, computer science, and nursing, where understanding ethical principles is crucial (Duncan & Geist, 2022). Students' ethical awareness develops through exposure to ethical dilemmas and practical experiences such as case studies and role-playing simulations, which enable them to recognize and respond to ethical issues effectively (Ocon, 2020). Active learning strategies, including in-class case analyses and standardized patient practice, have been shown to enhance students' ability to understand and apply ethical principles in a multidimensional manner (Kucukkelepce et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there remains a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, which can be addressed through experiential learning and reflective practice (Osonuga et al., 2026). Consistent integration of ethics into the curriculum, tailored to the context of specific fields such as social and environmental ethics in fashion design has been shown to enhance students' ethical awareness and application (Musumba et al., 2024; Jain & Wahee, 2018).

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a significant role as a medium for cultivating students' moral character through holistic and contextual approaches. The integration of Islamic values with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enhances students' ethical awareness and professional readiness while fostering creativity, critical thinking, and adaptability (Khimmatiev et al., 2025). Structured extracurricular activities in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), supported by teachers and parents, serve as effective means for cultivating virtuous character (Sahid et al., 2021). Historical and cultural approaches teach the development of moral thought in Islam, correct misconceptions, and strengthen moral pedagogy (Lovat, 2016). The implementation of Islamic values also supports social cohesion and peace by emphasizing brotherhood, tolerance, and social justice (Mardatillah et al., 2025). Value clarification methods assist students in selecting, communicating, and applying Islamic values effectively (Khadijah et al., 2019). Traditional cultural media, effective educational management, a humanistic paradigm, and character education integration in Indonesia and Malaysia collectively strengthen students' overall moral development (Asrori et al., 2025; Bahri et al., 2022; Subiyantoro et al., 2026; Mahanani et al., 2022).

The teaching of IRE has proven effective in shaping students' moral character through holistic and integrated learning strategies. The "Power of Two" strategy, emphasizing synergy between teachers and students, enables direct character formation through active interaction and intensive guidance (Masturin, 2024). At Madrasah Diniyah Ali Maksum, character education integration begins at the preparatory stage, encompassing curriculum design, teacher competency, and student admission systems, followed by learning methods, habituation, supervision, and ongoing evaluation (Muzayaroh, 2021). Integrating Islamic values into other subjects, such as mathematics, further reinforces students' character by demonstrating the relevance of religion in everyday life (Djannah et al., 2025). Additionally, holistic programs at MAN Aceh Besar and activities in pesantren emphasize the role of the entire school staff, supervision, and participation of ustadz to ensure the success of character education (Nuranifah et al., 2022; Purwanto et al., 2021). Practices such as expressive writing and reflection also facilitate the cognitive and emotional internalization of Islamic values (Kurniawan et al., 2025).

The success of IRE in shaping students' moral character is further supported by a moderate approach, integration of local culture, and a humanistic educational paradigm. Madrasahs such as Amanatul Ummah emphasize moderate Islamic values to promote tolerance and inclusivity, while the integration of local culture, such as Maja Labo Dahu, enhances students' engagement with character education (Ma'arif et al., 2024; Umar et al., 2025). The humanistic paradigm combined with religious dimensions addresses contemporary moral challenges, enabling holistic character development (Subiyantoro et al., 2026). However, the effectiveness of

IRE-based character education faces challenges, including social environmental influences, digital distractions, limited funding for teacher training, and low intrinsic motivation among students exposed to global culture (Syafri & Bin Budin, 2025; Irfani et al., 2025; Firmansyah et al., 2025). Therefore, character education strategies must be adaptive, continuous, and supported by institutions, teachers, and the community to ensure optimal internalization of moral values.

Observations and analyses by the researcher indicate that IRE learning has been implemented effectively; however, several challenges remain. Some students still experience difficulties in understanding the material, particularly in mastering virtuous character. Moreover, the teaching methods employed need to be adjusted to become more interactive and engaging for students. While teachers have applied various strategies, active student participation in the learning process still requires improvement. Some students tend to be passive, relying solely on teachers' explanations without further exploration. Therefore, innovations in teaching methods are necessary to increase student enthusiasm and improve comprehension. Implementing problem-based learning (PBL) in IRE can enhance the effectiveness of instruction.

Based on the background described, the researcher is motivated to conduct this study, which aims to examine the effectiveness of implementing the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model in Islamic Religious Education, identify its advantages, and analyze the challenges that arise during its implementation. Theoretically, this research is expected to expand insights and knowledge regarding the teaching of virtuous character and contribute to the development of Islamic education. Practically, it is anticipated that the study will provide recommendations for schools and educators to improve the quality of teaching, serve as a reference for future academic research, assist students in understanding the material more effectively, and act as a means of intellectual development for the researcher as part of academic requirements and a foundation for future scholarly expertise.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at Madrasah Aliyah Nurul Hidayah Assanusy Cimarga during the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method, which was used to systematically and in depth describe the implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and students' understanding of virtuous character. The data collected consisted of observations, interviews, and supporting documents related to the learning process. The research subjects included the school principal, IRE teachers, and students from grades X, XI, and XII at Madrasah Aliyah Nurul Hidayah Assanusy. The selection of research subjects was based on their direct involvement in the implementation of PBL-based IRE.

The data sources were divided into primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained directly from observations and interviews, while secondary data were gathered from school documents, archives, and other relevant records. Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to examine the school environment as well as the IRE learning process in the classroom. Interviews were conducted directly with IRE teachers and students to obtain information regarding the implementation of learning and students' understanding of virtuous character. Documentation was used to collect data such as notes, photographs of activities, and other supporting documents.

The data analysis technique applied was the interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and focusing on information relevant to the research objectives. Data display was presented descriptively to facilitate understanding. Conclusions were drawn based on the analysis of verified data.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Problem-Based Learning Process in Islamic Religious Education at Madrasah Aliyah Nurul Hidayah Assanusy Cimarga

1. Establishing Learning Objectives

In the stage of establishing learning objectives, the IRE teacher first prepares a lesson plan before the teaching and learning process begins. The teacher determines the goals to be achieved through the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model, such as training students' problem-solving skills, fostering independent thinking, and developing a more mature mindset. These objectives serve as a reference for the teacher in directing classroom activities. During implementation, the teacher actively provides motivation, guidance, and direction to students during discussions. The teacher also ensures that students understand the material and the problems being discussed by asking about parts that are unclear, thereby ensuring that the planned learning objectives are achieved optimally. According to Syahputra (2022), well-formulated learning objectives should include four components: Audience (A), Behaviour (B), Condition (C), and Degree (D).

2. Designing Problem Situations

The next stage involves designing the problem situations to be used in the learning process. The teacher presents problems that are close to students' daily lives and are not overly difficult, making them easier to understand and discuss collaboratively. Students are also given the freedom to choose which problems to discuss, which increases their interest and motivation. The problems presented are typically related to attitudes and behaviors associated with virtuous character that students frequently encounter in daily life. This approach enables students to better understand the context of the problem and connect the learning material with their experiences, making the problem-solving process more effective. Each problem-solving strategy in learning has its unique approach and objectives: Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is highly effective in promoting active engagement; Inquiry-Based Learning fosters curiosity; and Collaborative Problem Solving emphasizes teamwork (Siregar et al., 2024).

3. Analysis and Evaluation of Problem-Solving Processes

At the analysis and evaluation stage, the teacher helps students review the problem-solving processes they have undertaken. The teacher guides students to reflect on their thinking processes, discussion steps, and outcomes achieved from solving the problems. During this activity, the teacher provides feedback on students' answers and opinions and corrects any misunderstandings. The teacher also evaluates students' participation in group discussions and their ability to express ideas. Through this stage, students are expected to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their thinking processes, enabling them to improve problem-solving approaches in future learning activities. Observations indicated that students were generally conducive and active in responding to the researcher's questions about the problem-solving process; however, they were reluctant to ask questions in front of the class, even though some concepts were not fully understood, and they tended to be more comfortable asking questions in small groups or directly to the teacher individually (Amaliah et al., 2019).

The Effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education in Enhancing Students' Understanding of Virtuous Character

The implementation of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Islamic Religious Education has been proven effective in enhancing students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, particularly in the teaching of fiqh through a scientific approach (Haryani et al., 2019). Furthermore, the development of a PBL-based blended learning model in Islamic studies has shown practical and effective results for both small and large groups,

providing flexibility in the learning process (Hamzah et al., 2022). Communication facilitated through PBL creates a distinct learning experience compared to traditional methods, although students' overall comprehension levels remain similar (Nawi et al., 2020). PBL also positively affects student motivation and classroom climate; controlled experiments in secondary education demonstrate significant improvements in academic achievement, motivation, and classroom atmosphere (De Witte & Rogge, 2016). Moreover, PBL equips students with the ability to apply Islamic concepts to real-life issues, including sustainable development, population, planetary, and economic challenges, thus supporting contextual and relevant learning (Nugraha et al., 2024).

The effectiveness of the PBL model in teaching Akidah Akhlak can be assessed in several ways. First, it is evident in students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students demonstrate adequate critical thinking, as indicated by their willingness to ask questions when facing difficulties and their active participation in group discussions. They do not merely receive information from the teacher but actively seek to understand problems through discussion and expressing their opinions. This reflects rational thinking, characterized by the ability to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors according to moral values. Students' problem-solving skills are also apparent in how they approach the issues presented by the teacher, often attempting to solve problems independently or collaboratively before seeking teacher assistance. Their questions are focused and relevant to the problems being discussed. Additionally, most students are able to explain the definitions, examples, and positive impacts of virtuous character traits, such as *husnuzan* (good assumptions), *tawaduk* (humility), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *ta'awun* (cooperation). These findings indicate that PBL effectively trains students to think critically and enhances their problem-solving skills in relation to Akidah Akhlak content.

Second, the PBL model is effective in fostering independent learners. The IRE teacher actively guides less active students by providing stimuli in the form of questions and support during discussions. However, the teacher does not provide direct answers; instead, students are encouraged to find solutions independently through group discussions. This approach cultivates responsibility for their own learning process. Students resolve problems by discussing, exchanging ideas, and engaging in question-and-answer sessions with peers and the teacher. These activities reflect learning independence, as students do not rely solely on the teacher's explanations but actively seek and process information. Furthermore, students are capable of taking notes on key points and summarizing discussion outcomes. The effectiveness of this model is evident in achieving learning objectives, such as understanding the belief in the Books of Allah (SWT) and applying virtuous character in daily life. Therefore, PBL is considered effective in promoting independent learning and enhancing students' understanding in accordance with the established learning goals.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education in Enhancing Students' Understanding of Virtuous Character

Every learning model represents a method used by teachers to create an effective teaching and learning process to achieve educational objectives. First, the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model helps students gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, as they are required to think critically, actively participate in discussions, and solve problems related to Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Second, this model challenges students' abilities and provides intellectual satisfaction when they successfully discover new knowledge through investigation and group discussions. Third, PBL enhances enjoyable learning activities because students are directly involved in problem exploration, creating a more interactive and dynamic classroom environment. Fourth, this model facilitates the transfer of knowledge to real-life situations, as students are trained to connect the concepts they learn with problems they frequently encounter in daily life. Fifth, PBL encourages students to develop new knowledge and fosters a sense of responsibility for their own learning process, including evaluating both their learning outcomes and methods.

Despite its strengths, PBL-based IRE learning also has several weaknesses in enhancing students' understanding of virtuous character. First, students who lack interest in learning or confidence in their problem-solving abilities may be reluctant to participate and become less active in the learning process, resulting in low engagement in discussions and suboptimal understanding of the material. Teachers address this by providing continuous motivation and guidance, as well as offering alternative problems that students can choose based on their abilities. Second, PBL requires considerable preparation time, both in designing problems and conducting group discussions. Limited instructional time presents a challenge for teachers, which is mitigated by adjusting the difficulty level of problems to students' abilities and forming heterogeneous groups to enable peer support during problem-solving. Third, if students do not understand the purpose of solving the assigned problems, the learning process becomes less meaningful, and learning outcomes may be compromised. To address this, teachers explain and clarify that problem-solving activities aim to help students better comprehend virtuous character in a more accessible and profound manner. Time constraints and limited facilitator support remain major challenges in optimizing PBL implementation (Amirudin et al., 2025). Effective implementation requires adequate teacher training and proper introduction of PBL to students (Aldayel et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) is an innovative and effective instructional model for enhancing students' understanding, particularly regarding virtuous character. The implementation of PBL encourages students to actively engage in the learning process through critical thinking, group discussions, and problem-solving activities related to real-life situations. The primary strength of PBL lies in its ability to help students gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, as they do not merely receive information from the teacher but actively seek, analyze, and draw conclusions from the problems presented. However, PBL also has some weaknesses. One notable challenge arises when students have low learning interest or lack confidence in tackling problems they perceive as difficult, which may result in reduced participation and hindered understanding of the material. In this context, the teacher's role is crucial in providing motivation, guidance, and a supportive learning environment to minimize such obstacles. Overall, PBL-based IRE is considered effective and can serve as a valuable reference for improving the quality of learning and enhancing students' understanding of virtuous character values.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Alhamdulillah, all praise and gratitude are due to Allah SWT for His blessings and guidance, which have enabled the completion of this research. The author would like to express sincere thanks to all parties who provided support, guidance, and motivation throughout the research process. The results of this study indicate that Problem-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education is effective in enhancing students' understanding of virtuous character, fostering critical thinking skills, independent learning, and problem-solving abilities. It is hoped that this research will provide a meaningful contribution to the development of learning methods at Madrasah Aliyah, serve as a reference for teachers and future researchers, and assist students in understanding and applying moral values more deeply in their daily lives. May this study benefit the advancement of Islamic education in the future.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1 : Developed the conceptual framework and research design, ensuring the Problem-Based Learning model was appropriately applied to Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and focused on enhancing students' understanding of virtuous character.

- Author 2 : Conducted data collection and analysis, including classroom observations, interviews, and document review, and interpreted the findings related to students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and learning independence.
- Author 3 : Collaboratively validated the results, provided feedback on revisions, and ensured the overall coherence, rigor, and academic quality of the research, highlighting the impact on enhancing students' moral and ethical understanding.

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