

Islamic Education as an Agent of Social Transformation: A Pedagogical and Socio-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines Islamic Religious Education (IRE) as an agent of social transformation in the context of socio-cultural change, digital disruption, and literacy challenges. The study aims to analyze how Islamic education operates as a pedagogical, cultural, and institutional practice that shapes public ethics, critical awareness, and students' social participation. This research employed a qualitative, educational ethnographic design at SMA Muhammadiyah 4, Andong, Boyolali, Central Java. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with IRE teachers, school leaders, student activity advisors, and students, as well as documentation of curriculum materials, school programs, and cultural artifacts. Data were analyzed thematically through coding, theme development, and interpretive meaning-making. The findings show that Islamic school culture functions as a collective moral language, IRE pedagogy moves between normative transmission and critical dialogue, and digital transformation produces micro-justice practices based on Islamic values. The article contributes to strengthening the perspective of Critical Islamic Pedagogy by integrating pedagogical, leadership, and socio-cultural dimensions in explaining the role of IRE as an agent of social transformation.

Kata kunci:

Pendidikan Agama Islam; transformasi sosial; pedagogi Islam kritis.

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) sebagai agen transformasi sosial dalam konteks perubahan sosio-kultural, disrupsi digital, dan tantangan literasi. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menganalisis bagaimana Pendidikan Islam bekerja sebagai praktik pedagogis, kultural, dan institusional yang membentuk etika publik, kesadaran kritis, serta partisipasi sosial peserta didik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain etnografi pendidikan di SMA Muhammadiyah 4 Andong, Boyolali, Jawa Tengah. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan guru PAI, pimpinan sekolah, pembina kegiatan kesiswaan, dan peserta didik, serta dokumentasi kurikulum, program sekolah, dan artefak budaya sekolah. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui pengodean, pembentukan tema, dan penarikan makna interpretatif. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa budaya sekolah Islam berfungsi sebagai bahasa moral kolektif, pedagogi PAI bergerak antara transmisi normatif dan dialog kritis, serta transformasi digital memunculkan praktik keadilan mikro berbasis nilai Islam. Kontribusi artikel ini terletak pada penguatan perspektif Pedagogi Islam Kritis yang mengintegrasikan dimensi pedagogis, kepemimpinan, dan sosio-kultural dalam menjelaskan peran PAI sebagai agen transformasi sosial.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education needs to be reread in the context of increasingly rapid social change. Students today live in an environment shaped by digital information flows, changing communication patterns, and the shrinking of healthy dialogic spaces in society (Ahwan & Karfida, 2025; Badawi, 2025). At the same time, education still faces serious literacy problems. The World Bank report shows that approximately 70% of ten-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read and understand a simple text (World Bank, 2022). In Indonesia, the 2022 PISA results also show that students' achievement remains below the OECD average, with scores of 366 in mathematics, 359 in reading, and 383 in science (OECD, 2023). These conditions indicate that educational problems are not only related to academic ability but also to the capacity to reason, read social realities, and develop a responsible attitude. Therefore, Islamic Religious Education (IRE) should not be understood merely as a normative subject, but must also be viewed as a space for shaping students' awareness, public ethics, and social concern.

A number of studies show that Islamic education plays an important role in character formation, religious moderation, digital literacy, and social integration. Saada and Magadlah (2021) affirm that critical Islamic religious education is needed so that religious learning does not stop at the memorization of norms, but helps students read social problems critically. Mulya et al. (2022) show that tolerance among Muslim pre-service teachers is influenced by pedagogical experience and socio-political context. Rahman et al. (2022) also emphasize that religious moderation becomes more effective when developed through critical thinking and argumentation rather than indoctrination. Other studies on digital literacy in IRE learning show that technology creates new learning opportunities, but also brings access gaps and ethical issues (Lisyawati et al., 2023; Mathrani et al., 2022; Ma'arif et al., 2025). Nevertheless, most of these studies still discuss pedagogy, school culture, digitalization, and leadership separately. Hence, a research gap remains in examining how these elements work together in the everyday practices of Islamic schools, particularly at the levels of classroom practice, institutional culture, and students' social relations.

Based on this gap, this article aims to analyze the role of Islamic education as an agent of social transformation within the pedagogical and socio-cultural context of SMA Muhammadiyah 4 Andong. The study focuses on three main aspects: how Islamic school culture shapes a collective moral language, how IRE learning moves between value transmission and critical dialogue, and how school leadership and digitalization influence the formation of students' public ethics (Amalia, 2026; Andriyani & Leksono, 2024; Desmiati et al., 2023; Ningsih et al., 2025). Through this focus, the article does not merely explain the practices of IRE teachers in the classroom, but also examines how Islamic values are lived through habits, symbols, interactions, rules, social activities, and the use of technology in school.

This article seeks to demonstrate that Islamic education can become an agent of social transformation when Islamic values do not remain only as normative teachings, but are translated into dialogic pedagogical practices, participatory school culture, and school policies that are sensitive to social justice. The main argument of this article is that social transformation through IRE takes place gradually and contextually, beginning with value habituation, dialogue on real-life problems, strengthening of social responsibility, and the formation of students' public ethics. Thus, this article is expected to strengthen the perspective of Critical Islamic Pedagogy, namely a perspective that positions IRE as a space for forming religious human beings who are critical, caring, and able to live together in a diverse society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with an educational ethnographic design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study seeks to understand meanings, experiences, and social practices that occur naturally in school life. In line with Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative research enables researchers to understand educational realities from the perspectives of actors directly involved in them. An educational ethnographic design was used because the focus of the study was not limited to IRE learning in the classroom, but also included school culture, religious symbols, daily habits, leadership patterns, and social interactions that shape the practice of Islamic education. The study was conducted at SMA Muhammadiyah 4 Andong, Boyolali Regency, Central Java, from July to October 2025. This location was selected purposively because it has the characteristics of an Islamic school, a religious culture, student social activities, the use of learning technology, and diverse student social backgrounds.

Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document study. Observation was conducted during IRE learning, morning habituation activities, teacher-student interactions, religious activities, student council activities, and the use of digital media in school communication. Interviews were conducted with purposively selected informants, namely IRE teachers, the principal or school leadership elements, student activity advisors, students, and supporting informants relevant to the data needs. The interviews were directed at exploring informants' experiences regarding the role of IRE in shaping discipline, social concern, tolerance, digital literacy, and interactional ethics in school. Document study was conducted on curriculum documents, learning tools, school regulations, religious programs, documentation of social activities, and school cultural artifacts such as slogans, posters, and visual symbols used in public spaces within the school.

Data analysis was carried out from the beginning of the data collection process. The analytical stages included reading field notes, transcribing interviews, initial coding, grouping codes, developing themes, and drawing interpretive meanings. The analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis, which emphasize openness to data, pattern seeking, and the development of themes relevant to the research focus (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The main themes analyzed included school culture as a collective moral language,

IRE pedagogy between transmission and critical dialogue, digitalization and access justice, participatory leadership, and the formation of students' public ethics. Data trustworthiness was maintained through source and technique triangulation, rechecking with key informants, peer discussion, and the preparation of an audit trail. All informant data were handled ethically by protecting identity confidentiality, using quotations proportionally, and ensuring that the researcher's interpretations remained grounded in field evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This educational ethnographic study focused on a senior high school located in a rural area of Central Java, namely SMA Muhammadiyah 4 Andong (SMADIPA) in Boyolali Regency. Geographically and sociologically, the school exists within an agrarian-semi-urban community context experiencing social change due to economic mobility, the development of digital technology, and the entry of popular culture. Students come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including families of small traders, civil servants, private employees, informal-sector workers, micro-enterprise actors, and families with experiences of labor migration. This diversity creates a distinctive social dynamic in school life.

Institutionally, SMADIPA develops education that integrates the national curriculum with the strengthening of IRE, adab and akhlaq development, worship habituation, life skills, and entrepreneurship education. This integration is visible not only in curriculum documents, but also in daily school practices. The institutional tagline, "Religious young entrepreneurs, socially spirited, and environmentally concerned," displayed in classrooms, the teachers' room, and public areas of the school, functions as a value symbol that frames how school members think, act, and interact.

Configuration of School Culture: Progressive Islam as a Collective Moral Language

The initial findings show that the school culture at SMADIPA is built through collective practices that occur routinely and structurally. The practices of greeting, acknowledging, and smiling (3S), enforcement of uniform discipline, daily worship habituation, and emphasis on adab in public school spaces are the main elements that shape institutional culture. These practices are interconnected and form a moral language collectively understood by school members.

Every morning, duty teachers welcome students at the school gate while applying the 3S practice, checking neatness, and monitoring punctuality. Rule enforcement is carried out through brief advice on responsibility, ethics, and the meaning of discipline from an Islamic perspective. This practice shows that discipline is not understood merely as compliance with rules, but also as a process of internalizing moral values.

This finding is consistent with the view that religious education plays a role in shaping students' virtues and character (Metcalf & Moulin-Stožek, 2021). However, from a critical perspective, moral formation through discipline must still be accompanied by space for reflection so that it does not turn into rigid social control. Field

notes show that lateness to school is perceived not only as a rule violation, but also as a social responsibility toward teachers and peers. This indicates that school norms operate through peer regulation, not merely through formal sanctions.

This pattern strengthens national research emphasizing the importance of integrating character education through IRE learning management and value habituation (Arista et al., 2023; Munawir et al., 2024; Zamroni et al., 2025). At SMADIPA, moral norms are not present only in the IRE subject, but also permeate school regulations, assembly speeches, school slogans, social activities, and religious practices. Thus, school culture becomes a hidden curriculum that shapes students' ethical sensitivity.

IRE Pedagogy as an Agent of Social Transformation: Between Transmission and Critical Dialogue

The findings show that IRE pedagogical practice at SMADIPA has two main patterns that operate side by side, namely value-transmission-based pedagogy and dialogic-contextual pedagogy. Transmission pedagogy is marked by lectures, note-taking, the strengthening of normative textual evidence, and assessment through written tests or brief products. This model is used for materials related to curriculum completion and mastery of basic concepts.

In the teaching of fiqh muamalah, for example, the teacher explains conceptual definitions, normative evidence, and simple transaction examples, then closes the lesson with exercises. This approach helps students understand minimum content standards, but risks reducing religion to a set of normative information if it is not connected to students' social experiences.

By contrast, dialogic-contextual pedagogy connects IRE content with issues close to students' lives, such as the use of social media, consumption ethics, social solidarity, and interpersonal relations. In classroom discussions, the teacher invites students to evaluate the responsibility of Muslim students when receiving and sharing information in family social media groups. In this practice, religious teachings function as an ethical framework for building students' digital literacy and social reasoning (Lisyawati et al., 2023; Ma'arif et al., 2025).

The shift from transmission pedagogy toward critical dialogue does not occur without obstacles. Some students are still accustomed to one-way learning patterns and single-answer expectations. This tension reflects the encounter between authoritative traditions in religious education and the need to cultivate reflective ethical reasoning in modern society (Putkonen et al., 2025). This finding reinforces the view that Islamic education needs to be directed toward the formation of human beings who are religious, critical, and socially empowered.

At the micro level, dialogic pedagogy becomes more visible when teachers use case studies, guided debates with discussion ethics, and small-scale social projects. One example is students' involvement in an anti-bullying campaign linked to Islamic ethical

values. Through this practice, IRE not only transmits religious norms but also cultivates critical awareness and collective concern.

Digital Transformation: Between Emancipatory Potential and the Reproduction of Inequality

Digital transformation at SMADIPA is visible through the use of class WhatsApp groups, Google Forms for evaluation, and the distribution of learning materials through online platforms. These practices developed after the pandemic and continue to be used because they are considered efficient and flexible. National findings show that IRE learning in the new-normal era tends to adopt hybrid models that require pedagogical adaptation and character strengthening (Abidin et al., 2022).

However, this study also shows the existence of unequal digital access among students. Not all students have adequate devices or stable internet access. Some students have to adjust their study time due to limitations in devices, data quotas, or network quality. This condition shows that digitalization in education can expand learning opportunities, but it can also reinforce socio-economic inequality if not accompanied by fair school policies.

From the perspective of global citizenship education, religious learning needs to become a space for cultivating social justice and siding with vulnerable groups, not merely a site of technical innovation (Saada, 2023). Therefore, digital transformation must be understood as an educational arena laden with power relations. At SMADIPA, IRE teachers seek to reduce inequality through task flexibility, alternative manual assignments or oral presentations, and access to the school computer laboratory. This policy reflects contextual micro-justice practices.

Leadership and Governance: From Instruction to Cultural Orchestration

Within the school organizational structure, the principal and management team act as drivers of institutional culture. The findings show that leadership at SMADIPA resembles a process of value orchestration more than merely the delivery of administrative instructions. The principal emphasizes the importance of value orientation in academic and non-academic programs.

The literature on Islamic educational management explains that leadership and the availability of facilities and infrastructure contribute to educational quality (Muslimin & Kartiko, 2021). In this study, leadership becomes most meaningful for students when it is visible in everyday practices, such as rule consistency, communication that respects students' dignity, and the provision of participatory space.

The student council advisor emphasized that students' social programs developed better when the school gave students trust to design, implement, and evaluate activities independently. This approach is consistent with the whole-school approach, which views school culture and leadership as the foundation of value consistency in curricular and extracurricular activities. Value-based accountability practices, such as moral

reflection in social activity reports, strengthen the role of IRE as an agent of social transformation.

Socio-Cultural Negotiation: Local Tradition, Youth Identity, and Public Ethics

SMADIPA exists within a social landscape that brings together community religiosity, local traditions, and aspirations for social mobility. Students carry layered identities as rural youth, members of worker or micro-enterprise families, active social media users, and learners in an Islamic school. These diverse identities give rise to processes of value negotiation in everyday life.

Issues such as viral content, show-off culture, and gender relations become entry points for discussions of Islamic ethics in the classroom. Some students view school rules as a form of restriction, while others see them as moral protection. This tension shows that religious education is a space of existential navigation, where students interpret tradition and construct self-meaning in the modern world (Putkonen et al., 2025).

In this context, IRE at SMADIPA plays a role in shaping students' public ethics, namely the ability to coexist with dignity, respect differences, manage conflict, and build social solidarity. Thus, IRE functions not only as a normative subject but also as a medium of sustainable social transformation.

Core Indicator	Findings	Meaning in Critical Islamic Pedagogy	Implications for Social Transformation
School culture as a moral structure	School culture is built through collective practices, such as 3S, discipline, worship, and value slogans.	School culture becomes a hidden curriculum that shapes ethical awareness, not merely symbolic compliance.	A religious habitus is formed that supports social cohesion and public ethics.
IRE pedagogy and critical awareness	There are two pedagogical patterns: normative transmission and dialogic-contextual pedagogy based on social issues.	Dialogic pedagogy opens space for reflection, problematization of reality, and the formation of empowered subjects.	IRE functions as a means of emancipation and critical reading of social reality.
Power relations and social control	School norms operate through peer regulation and collective responsibility.	Discipline is interpreted as ethical awareness, not repressive control.	Non-authoritarian social control based on values and solidarity is formed.
Digital transformation and justice	Digitalized learning opens learning opportunities but also reveals unequal access.	Technology is understood as an educational arena requiring ethical partiality.	Micro-justice practices prevent the reproduction of social inequality.
Leadership and social participation	School leadership acts as an orchestrator of values and provides	Dialogic leadership strengthens education as a liberating praxis.	Students develop as reflective and participatory social actors.

space for student participation.

DISCUSSION

This discussion interprets the findings of the educational ethnographic study at SMA Muhammadiyah 4 Andong by bringing them into dialogue with relevant contemporary theories and research. The discussion does not repeat the results, but explains the meaning, position, and contribution of the findings to the development of IRE studies, particularly from the perspective of Critical Islamic Pedagogy. In this way, the discussion highlights the differences between the findings of this study and previous research while affirming the article's conceptual novelty.

Islamic School Culture as the Production of Public Ethics

Previous studies on Islamic school culture generally view religious habituation, discipline, and teacher exemplarity as instruments for shaping students' religious character (Metcalf & Moulin-Stožek, 2021; Pakpahan & Habibah, 2021). In this framework, school culture is often understood as a mechanism for internalizing normative values aimed at creating obedience, behavioral order, and consistency in religious practice.

The findings of this study show a shift in meaning from that approach. School culture at SMADIPA does not stop at ritual habituation or the strengthening of individual behavior, but operates as a collective moral language that shapes students' social relations and public awareness. The 3S practice, neatness checks, adab habituation in public spaces, and the use of institutional slogans not only regulate personal actions but also build a shared understanding of dignity, social responsibility, and interactional ethics.

The main difference from previous research lies in the working mechanism of school culture. Discipline at SMADIPA is not primarily enforced through administrative punishment, but through peer social regulation. Shame, responsibility, and moral commitment emerge from student interactions and everyday social relations. This finding is in line with Li et al. (2021), who show that discipline based on structure, support, and teacher-student relations is associated with strengthened student self-control. This study adds that such regulation is produced through a religious-cultural habitus, not merely through technocratic institutional norms.

From the perspective of Critical Islamic Pedagogy, Islamic school culture is not only a means of forming personal religiosity but also a space for producing public ethics. Students learn to express Islamic values in real social interactions. This finding expands studies that have focused more on classroom space and learning materials, because it shows that the transformation of social awareness also occurs through the institutional hidden curriculum.

IRE Pedagogy: Negotiating Normative Authority and Critical Awareness

Recent literature on IRE often distinguishes pedagogical practice into two approaches: transmission and dialogue. Transmission pedagogy functions to maintain the continuity of tradition, normative certainty, and value stability. Meanwhile, dialogic pedagogy encourages reflection, participation, and students' active involvement. This distinction often creates the impression that dialogic pedagogy is always superior to transmission-oriented approaches.

The results of this study show a more complex dynamic. At SMADIPA, transmission and dialogue pedagogy do not negate each other; instead, they negotiate contextually. Transmission pedagogy continues to be used for materials that require mastery of basic concepts, while dialogic pedagogy is activated when the material touches social issues close to students' lives, such as digital hoaxes, social media ethics, excessive consumption, and social solidarity.

The main difference from previous research is the finding on students' epistemic resistance to dialogic pedagogy. Some students are more comfortable with the certainty of single answers and the teacher's normative authority. This phenomenon is rarely discussed in depth in IRE studies, which often assume that dialogue is always received positively. This finding shows that pedagogical transformation is determined not only by teaching methods, but also by long-established learning cultures (Ahmad & Syihabuddin, 2025; Asweni et al., 2024).

Within the framework of Critical Islamic Pedagogy, the tension between normative authority and critical dialogue should not be viewed as a pedagogical failure. Rather, this tension can become a productive space for transformation. Religious authority is not eliminated, but reconstructed into an ethical authority that opens space for reasoning, moral responsibility, and contextual reflection (Saada & Magadlah, 2021; Putkonen et al., 2025).

Thus, the conceptual contribution of this study lies in affirming that dialogic pedagogy in IRE must be understood as a gradual, contextual, and negotiated process. The success of critical pedagogy depends greatly on the readiness of learning culture and the epistemic relationship between teachers and students.

Digital Transformation and School Leadership: IRE within a Social Justice Framework

Global research after the pandemic has largely emphasized digital transformation as a learning innovation that increases flexibility, efficiency, and access to learning resources (Azubuike et al., 2021; Mathrani et al., 2022). In national IRE studies, digitalization is also positioned as both a pedagogical challenge and an opportunity to improve students' digital literacy (Lisyawati et al., 2023; Ma'arif et al., 2025).

This study offers a different perspective by placing digital transformation within a social justice framework. The findings show that the digitalization of IRE learning at SMADIPA is not neutral because it reveals unequal access to devices and internet data among students. This condition indicates that digital innovation can reproduce socio-

economic inequality if it is not accompanied by adequate affirmative school policies (Aulia et al., 2025; Fajri et al., 2025).

Unlike studies that stop at technical constraints, this study affirms that digitalization is an educational arena laden with power relations. The school's response in the form of task flexibility and access to the computer laboratory can be understood as a micro-justice practice. Research on reachability in distance learning also emphasizes the importance of affirmative policies so that students do not experience academic exclusion (Avanesian et al., 2021).

This justice dimension is strengthened by school leadership. In contrast to Islamic educational leadership studies that often emphasize managerial and administrative aspects, the findings of this study show that leadership at SMADIPA functions as an orchestration of emancipatory values. Providing participatory space for the student council to design social programs is not only a student affairs strategy, but also a pedagogical praxis that shapes students as reflective and responsible social actors.

The new finding emphasized in this subsection is the integration of digital transformation, participatory leadership, and IRE as a praxis of social justice. Thus, this study shifts the paradigm of IRE from normative-individual education toward public ethics education that is contextual to the challenges of the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Islamic school culture at SMA Muhammadiyah 4 Andong functions not only as a mechanism of normative compliance, but as a living and collective production of public ethics. Discipline, religious habituation, and institutional symbols are not primarily implemented through formal sanctions or coercive control, but through peer social regulation that fosters social shame, moral responsibility, and shared ethical awareness. This finding shows that Islamic values operate strongly through informal social interactions, not only through classroom learning.

From a scholarly perspective, this study not only confirms the role of school culture and IRE pedagogy in character formation, but also broadens the theoretical perspective. This article shows that Islamic school culture can function as a collective moral language that produces public ethics. In addition, this study positions IRE as a praxis of public ethics and social justice, especially in the negotiation between normative pedagogy, critical dialogue, digital transformation, and participatory leadership. The main contribution of this study lies in strengthening a framework of Critical Islamic Pedagogy that is relational, contextual, and multi-level.

The limitations of this study need to be considered proportionally. First, the study was conducted in one senior high school, so it does not yet represent variations in Islamic education practices across other educational levels or different socio-cultural regions. Second, students' experiences based on gender, age, and socio-economic background have not been examined in greater detail. Third, the qualitative ethnographic approach is strong in analytical depth, but is not intended for statistical generalization. Therefore, further research involving varied locations, educational

levels, and combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods is needed so that the findings can become a basis for IRE policy that is more contextual, inclusive, and oriented toward public ethics and social justice.

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