

Lppm UIN Saizu

Khaeriyah et al_Enhancing Spiritual Intelligence Through Religious Mentorship

 Jurnal 12

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trn:oid:::3618:116019573

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Volume 6 Nomor 2 (2025) Pages 322-332

Edubase : Journal of Basic Education

Email Journal : edubase.bbc@gmail.com

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Enhancing Spiritual Intelligence Through Religious Mentorship: A Case Study at Al-Ishlah Elementary School

Umamatul Khaeriyah¹, Septi Gumindari², Ilman Nafi'a³, Muhammad Fathi Ilmy⁴

^{1,2,3} UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon, Indonesia

⁴ University of Ez-Zitouna, Tunisia

Received: 2025-03-25; Revised: 2025-09-22; Accepted: 2025-10-08

Abstract

Objective: This study aims to explore the strategies used by religious mentors at Al-Ishlah Elementary School in fostering students' spiritual intelligence, identify the challenges they encounter, and examine the efforts made to overcome these barriers. **Novelty:** The research contributes to the limited empirical literature on spiritual intelligence development at the elementary level within Indonesian Islamic schools, emphasizing the unique role of religious mentorship in character formation and faith-based resilience. **Methods:** Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with one religious mentor and questionnaires administered to 36 students. **Results:** The findings reveal that students' spiritual intelligence levels are predominantly "very high" (52.8%) and "high" (41.7%), indicating a generally strong spiritual foundation. Effective mentoring strategies include daily recitation of Asmaul Husna, congregational Dhuhr prayers, collective Yasin and istighosah, as well as Qur'anic literacy and memorization programs. **Conclusions:** Despite challenges such as limited concentration, Qur'anic fluency, tardiness, and time constraints, mentors effectively address these issues through psychological understanding, motivational reinforcement, open communication, and reward-based encouragement. The study underscores the vital influence of religious mentorship in nurturing students' spiritual intelligence and holistic personal growth.

Keywords: Spiritual Intelligence, Religious Mentorship, Islamic Elementary Education, Mentoring Strategies, Student Character Development.

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Corresponding Author:

Septi Gumindari
UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon
septigumindari@uinssc.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a strategic foundation for national development, aimed at cultivating not only intellectual capabilities but also moral and spiritual dimensions of the individual (Romadayani et al., 2020). While academic success has long been measured by cognitive intelligence (IQ), growing complexities in social and personal life reveal that IQ alone is insufficient. The challenges of the 21st century demand balanced development across intellectual, emotional, and spiritual domains (Aryadillah et al., 2021).

In the Indonesian context, although religious education is formally embedded in the national curriculum, its implementation in schools often emphasizes ritualistic practice or content memorization over the internalization of values such as sincerity, empathy, humility, and integrity (Amirullah, 2020; Jalal et al., 2021). Spiritual intelligence—defined by Zohar and Marshall as the capacity to act wisely and compassionately, guided by inner moral conviction—is often underexplored in educational discourse (Saihu, 2022). Students who develop spiritual intelligence are better equipped to find meaning in life, make ethical decisions, and build harmonious relationships grounded in their faith (Permadi et al., 2020).

Despite its critical role, spiritual intelligence has not received proportional attention in elementary-level education. Many religious programs in schools remain formalistic, with little effort to contextualize spiritual values according to the developmental needs of children (Qoniah, 2019a). As a result, students may engage in rituals such as prayer or Qur'anic recitation without understanding their spiritual significance, resulting in shallow religious experience and behavior. This gap between the ideal goals of spiritual education and its actual classroom practices reflects a need for empirical research that examines how spiritual development, particularly through religious mentorship, is conducted in real educational settings.

Although several studies have addressed strategies for enhancing spiritual intelligence, these studies have primarily focused on older students or boarding school (pesantren) environments. Research by Komariah et al. (2021), for example, explored how Islamic Education teachers at SMAN 1 Pantai Lunci used independent learning strategies, task-based religious activities, and structured evaluation to promote students' spiritual intelligence. However, their focus was limited to secondary education, and did not investigate implementation barriers or problem-solving strategies.

Another study by Mardiah et al. (2021) employed a library research method to identify ways teachers can promote children's spiritual intelligence through reflection, kindness, positive thinking, and involvement in worship. While insightful, the study was theoretical in nature and not grounded in field data. In contrast, Jaelani and Ilham (2019) conducted qualitative field research at MTs Negeri 3 Mataram and found that spiritual development was integrated into both classroom and extracurricular activities, such as congregational prayer and charity events. However, their study addressed both emotional and spiritual intelligence simultaneously, without isolating the mechanisms specific to spiritual development.

Recognizing these limitations, the present study focuses on religious mentorship strategies at the elementary school level—specifically, Al-Ishlah Elementary School. It aims to fill a research gap by offering an in-depth, field-based analysis of how religious mentors

develop spiritual intelligence in young learners, the challenges they face, and the efforts they undertake to overcome them.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to analyze the strategies employed by religious mentors in developing students' spiritual intelligence; (2) to identify the challenges encountered in the implementation process; and (3) to explore the adaptive efforts made to address these obstacles. This research is expected to enrich both theoretical and practical insights in the field of Islamic education and provide a reference for future studies concerned with character formation through spiritual development in schools.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the strategies, challenges, and efforts of religious mentors in developing students' spiritual intelligence at Al-Ishlah Elementary School. The qualitative method was chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, particularly how spiritual development is interpreted and implemented in a real-life school setting (Fadli, 2021). This approach is appropriate for capturing the lived experiences of the participants and the context in which spiritual mentoring takes place.

The research was conducted at Al-Ishlah Elementary School in Kuningan, West Java. The school was selected through purposive sampling due to its structured integration of Islamic values into daily school activities. Participants included three key religious mentors (SG, AM, and EQ), who oversee and implement spiritual programs at the school, and 36 students from upper elementary grades (grades 4–6) who regularly participate in these activities. The religious mentor was selected due to her role as the primary facilitator and planner of religious guidance programs, ensuring access to rich, contextual data.

Data were collected using two primary techniques: (1) In-depth interviews with the religious mentor, guided by a semi-structured interview protocol developed from prior literature. The interviews explored the planning, implementation, and evaluation of spiritual mentoring, as well as perceived challenges and strategies to overcome them. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. (2) Questionnaire-based assessment of students' spiritual intelligence, using a self-report instrument containing 29 validated items adapted from indicators proposed by Zohar and Marshall (as cited in Saihu, 2022) and contextualized for the elementary school level. The questionnaire used a 4-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to measure indicators such as flexibility, religiosity, ethical behavior, and empathy. The instrument underwent expert review for content validity and was pilot-tested with a similar group of students for clarity and reliability.

The data collection and data analysis activities were carried out simultaneously, involving an iterative and interactive process rather than a linear one. According to Miles and Huberman, the process of qualitative data analysis includes several stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Rijali, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Students' Spiritual Intelligence Levels

The initial stage of this study assessed the spiritual intelligence levels of 36 students in grades 4 to 6 at Al-Ishlah Elementary School. Utilizing a 29-item self-assessment questionnaire adapted from the indicators proposed by Zohar and Marshall, the dimensions explored included flexibility, religiosity, ethical behavior, and emotional awareness. The results revealed that 52.8% of students were categorized as having “very high” spiritual intelligence, 41.7% as “high,” and only 5.5% as “low,” with no students falling into the “very low” category.

These findings suggest that the majority of students at Al-Ishlah possess strong foundations in spiritual awareness and moral behavior. This aligns with research conducted by Permadi et al. (2020), who observed that children who are routinely involved in structured religious activities tend to exhibit greater spiritual sensitivity, ethical behavior, and emotional balance. Such high levels of spiritual intelligence among students support the assumption that the school's religious mentoring programs are not merely symbolic but play a substantial role in shaping students' inner values and spiritual capacities.

In light of these findings, the subsequent sections explore the strategies employed to foster this spiritual intelligence, the challenges encountered, and the ways in which these challenges are addressed.

Strategies of Religious Mentors in Developing Students' Spiritual Intelligence

The religious mentor at Al-Ishlah Elementary School employs a structured and student-centered approach in fostering students' spiritual intelligence, which includes three key phases: planning, implementation, and evaluation. During the planning phase, the mentor begins by identifying students' spiritual profiles and aligning mentoring strategies accordingly. As noted in an interview with SG, the mentor emphasized the importance of understanding students' individual traits as a foundation for effective planning:

“The first thing we need to do is understand the students' character. Teachers are also expected to establish good communication with students during every activity. Then, we must design the programs to be implemented along with their schedules so everything is organized and runs smoothly. These activities must be carried out regularly and should not stop midway.”
(Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School)

This statement underscores the significance of recognizing students' individual characteristics to ensure that spiritual development activities are both meaningful and developmentally appropriate. This perspective aligns with Kusnawan (in Ropiah et al., 2019), who asserts that effective educational planning should begin with a deep understanding of learners' backgrounds.

Implementation includes a series of habitual and value-laden religious activities: daily recitation of Asmaul Husna, congregational Dhuhr prayers, weekly Yasin recitations and istighosah sessions, and Qur'anic literacy and memorization programs. Each activity is not merely ritualistic but is designed to cultivate spiritual virtues such as patience, humility, discipline, and gratitude. These practices correspond with the findings of Fadhilah et al. (2022), who demonstrated that regular Asmaul Husna recitation fosters inner peace and a sense of divine presence in daily life.

Moreover, Dhuhr congregational prayer fosters discipline and unity among students—reflecting findings by Hasan (2019), who emphasized that prayer in congregation instills both spiritual and social values. The program of Qur'anic memorization, which aims for mastery of

Juz 30 by graduation, supports students' long-term spiritual development, in line with Rahmayani et al. (2021), who reported that Qur'anic memorization contributes significantly to students' emotional resilience and moral awareness.

Evaluation is conducted through regular monitoring of student enthusiasm and memorization achievements. SG emphasizes reward-based recognition to further reinforce student motivation, which aligns with Mesiono's (2017) argument that formative assessment combined with appreciation can significantly elevate student engagement. The success of these strategies is reflected in the high percentages of students categorized as having "very high" and "high" levels of spiritual intelligence, thus suggesting a well-aligned mentoring model that combines discipline with empathy.

Challenges Faced by Religious Mentors in Developing Students' Spiritual Intelligence

Despite the implementation of well-structured programs, the religious mentor at Al-Ishlah Elementary School faces several challenges that hinder the optimal development of students' spiritual intelligence. These challenges highlight the gap between planned strategies and real-world constraints in the school environment.

One significant obstacle in developing students' spiritual intelligence is their lack of concentration during religious activities. As noted by EQ:

"One of the most frequent obstacles we face in developing spiritual intelligence through religious activities is the students' lack of concentration. Sometimes, mischievous students disturb their friends, making it difficult for them to focus. This often happens because teachers do not always accompany the students during religious activities." (*Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School*)

From the above statement, it can be inferred that some students tend to distract their peers, particularly when teacher supervision is limited. The absence of consistent guidance disrupts the learning environment and undermines the effectiveness of spiritual development efforts. These findings are consistent with Mustofa et al. (2023), who argue that sustained concentration is essential for meaningful engagement in religious education. Likewise, Rinawati (2021) points out that low student engagement is often linked to perceptions that activities are monotonous or disconnected from their interests.

Another significant challenge in developing students' spiritual intelligence is the limited Qur'anic literacy among some students, which hinders their participation in activities such as recitation and memorization. EQ noted:

"At Al-Ishlah Elementary School, some students still struggle with reading the Qur'an or are not fluent due to a lack of knowledge about its proper recitation. This creates a barrier to spiritual development, as these students often feel ashamed or reluctant to read the Qur'an." (*Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School*)

From this statement, it can be concluded that not all students at Al-Ishlah Elementary School possess the ability to read or write the Qur'an fluently. This limitation is primarily due to a lack of understanding of religious teachings, which in turn diminishes their motivation to engage with the Qur'an. Feelings of shame and low self-confidence further discourage participation in spiritual activities. These findings align with the studies of Qoni'ah (2019b) and Sholehudin (2018), which similarly found that limited Qur'anic proficiency impedes the

effectiveness of spiritual programs and often results in students disengaging from religious learning.

Tardiness is another recurring challenge that hinders the development of students' spiritual intelligence. Many spiritual activities, such as the recitation of *Asmaul Husna*, are scheduled early in the morning before formal academic lessons begin. However, some students arrive late—either unintentionally or deliberately—causing them to miss these spiritually enriching sessions. As EQ explains:

“Many students arrive late and miss the morning religious activities. Some are genuinely late, while others deliberately find excuses to avoid these sessions.” (*Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School*)

This statement highlights that student tardiness significantly reduces their opportunity to participate in religious routines that are designed to foster spiritual growth. When students are habitually late, they lose valuable time intended for internalizing spiritual values, which negatively impacts their overall personal and moral development. The loss is not merely in terms of attendance, but also in the disruption of consistency and depth in their spiritual experience. This aligns with Sholehudin (2018), who found that tardiness disrupts students' spiritual routines and weakens their connection to the communal rhythm of religious practice, ultimately diminishing the long-term impact of such activities.

Lastly, time constraints present a structural challenge in the implementation of spiritual development programs. Since most religious activities are scheduled outside regular academic hours, the time available for meaningful spiritual engagement is often limited. EQ elaborates:

“As a religious mentor, I feel there are limitations in the strategies we implement due to the restricted time available for each program. Most of these activities are conducted outside the regular teaching hours and are not part of formal curriculum, so the time allocated is often insufficient.” (*Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School*)

From this statement, it can be inferred that the limited time allocated to religious activities constitutes a significant obstacle for the mentor in executing comprehensive strategies to develop students' spiritual intelligence. The lack of integration into the formal curriculum often results in insufficient duration and continuity of spiritual programs. As a result, the mentor is required to devise alternative methods to ensure these activities remain both effective and well-organized despite time limitations.

This challenge aligns with the findings of Elfiah (2014), who noted that spiritual programs conducted outside of formal instructional hours are often rushed and lack sufficient resources, in contrast to pesantren-based models that embed spiritual development into the daily routine as a core component of education.

Based on the explanations above, it can be concluded that religious mentors at Al-Ishlah Elementary School face several interrelated challenges in developing students' spiritual intelligence. These include students' lack of concentration during religious activities, limited Qur'anic literacy that leads to feelings of shame and disengagement, habitual tardiness that causes students to miss key moments of spiritual formation, and time constraints due to the non-integrated nature of religious programs within the formal school schedule. Collectively, these obstacles hinder the consistency and effectiveness of spiritual mentoring efforts. These challenges emphasize the need for adaptive strategies that go beyond the standard curriculum

and consider the psychological, logistical, and developmental dimensions of elementary school learners.

Efforts Made by the Religious Mentor to Overcome the Challenges in Developing Students' Spiritual Intelligence

To address the aforementioned challenges, the religious mentor at Al-Ishlah Elementary School has undertaken a range of adaptive strategies grounded in psychological understanding, motivation, student empowerment, and reinforcement.

The first strategy involves deepening the understanding of students' psychological conditions as a foundational step in effective spiritual mentoring. AM stated:

“As a mentor, I must improve my understanding of students' psychological conditions. I constantly explain to them how important spiritual activities are in the learning process. Students need to open their minds. A truly intelligent student is one who can utilize all their inner resources to solve problems and meet life's challenges.” (*Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School*)

This statement illustrates the critical role of religious mentors in fostering students' awareness of the value of spiritual intelligence. Without this awareness, students may tend to overlook or underestimate the significance of engaging in spiritual activities. This approach aligns with the insights of Sakerebau (2018), who emphasized that effective mentoring must consider students' inherited traits, developmental stages, and emotional readiness. Similarly, Handayani (2019) argued that psychological barriers often hinder students from fully engaging in meaningful learning—especially in spiritual domains that require personal reflection and emotional openness.

The second strategy involves the proactive provision of personal motivation by the mentor and other teachers to students who show low enthusiasm or lack participation in spiritual activities. AM shared:

“When a student doesn't participate in spiritual activities, either I or another teacher will call them in for a conversation. We offer motivation and encouragement to join in. This way, students feel free to express their thoughts. We also provide motivational talks during lessons and after activities like *Asmaul Husna* recitations.” (*Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School*)

This approach of direct engagement and continuous encouragement plays a key role in rekindling students' interest and involvement in spiritual practices. One-on-one conversations are used not only to encourage participation but also to make students feel acknowledged and emotionally supported. This strategy aligns with Emda (2017), who emphasizes that motivational support can reawaken students' interest, particularly when their lack of engagement stems from internal challenges rather than cognitive limitations. Motivation also acts as a crucial driver of spiritual resilience, as underscored by Zahrudin et al. (2021), who found that sustained encouragement significantly contributes to consistent religious practices both at school and in the home environment.

The third strategy involves fostering an open and communicative school environment where students are encouraged to express their opinions about religious programs. AM explained:

“To address issues with our programs, I allow students to share what they think might be lacking or causing boredom. We have open discussions to ensure that everyone is happy to participate.” (*Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School*)

Fostering open communication is essential for making the program more responsive to students’ needs and experiences. By inviting feedback, especially on aspects students find uninteresting or challenging, the mentor promotes a sense of shared responsibility and inclusivity in the learning process. Such an approach not only enhances student engagement but also helps in adjusting the programs to better suit their developmental and emotional readiness. This is consistent with the findings of Prijanto and Kock (2021), who argue that open dialogue improves student involvement and enables timely pedagogical adaptations. Fatimah (2016) further supports this perspective, emphasizing that giving students a voice contributes to improved learning outcomes and reduces resistance to participation.

The fourth strategy involves implementing a reward-based system to recognize students who demonstrate strong spiritual intelligence and active participation in religious activities. AM shared:

“I usually give rewards to students who demonstrate strong spiritual intelligence. Rewards are a form of appreciation, and they can motivate other students to follow the example. They also help boost students’ confidence and encourage them to be more diligent and obedient.” (*Interview excerpt, March 28, 2025, Al-Ishlah Elementary School*)

Providing tangible recognition serves as a form of positive reinforcement that not only acknowledges the efforts of individual students but also inspires their peers to strive for similar achievements. This approach helps to build a motivating environment where good behavior and spiritual diligence are celebrated and emulated. It is aligned with behaviorist learning theory, which posits that the use of rewards can strengthen desired behaviors (Hasanah et al., 2022). Syaefuddin (in Widayanti et al., 2018) also supports this view, stating that rewards are effective in fostering sustained engagement, particularly in the context of character building and values education.

Based on the explanations above, it can be concluded that the religious mentor at Al-Ishlah Elementary School employs a variety of strategies to overcome challenges in developing students’ spiritual intelligence. These include deepening their understanding of students’ psychological conditions to provide more empathetic guidance, offering continuous personal motivation through both individual and group encouragement, fostering open communication by inviting student feedback on religious programs, and implementing a reward-based system to reinforce positive spiritual behaviors. These multidimensional efforts—psychological insight, motivational dialogue, inclusive communication, and reinforcement through rewards—demonstrate a holistic and student-centered approach to spiritual mentoring. They transform challenges into opportunities for growth and affirm the vital role of religious mentors in shaping not only rituals but also the moral and emotional foundations of young learners.

CONCLUSION

The integrated analysis of findings and discussion reveals that spiritual intelligence among students at Al-Ishlah Elementary School is generally high, supported by a systematic religious mentorship program that combines routine spiritual practices with thoughtful

educational strategies. While challenges such as limited concentration, Qur'anic illiteracy, tardiness, and time constraints do exist, the religious mentor's adaptive responses—including psychological understanding, motivational support, open communication, and positive reinforcement—have played a significant role in maintaining the program's effectiveness. These findings not only highlight the crucial role of religious mentorship in character development but also underscore the importance of contextual, empathetic, and student-responsive strategies in fostering spiritual intelligence at the elementary level. This study thus contributes valuable insights for educators, school leaders, and researchers seeking to advance holistic spiritual education in similar institutional settings.

While the study offers meaningful contributions, it is not without limitations. First, the scope of this research is confined to a single elementary school and relies primarily on qualitative data from one religious mentor and a limited student sample. This narrow context may not fully capture the diversity of spiritual mentoring practices across different educational environments. Second, the measurement of spiritual intelligence was based on self-reported perceptions, which may be subject to bias or overestimation. Third, the study focused primarily on strategy, challenge, and effort dimensions without exploring deeper correlations between spiritual intelligence and other aspects of student development, such as academic achievement or socio-emotional growth.

Future researchers are encouraged to expand the scope by conducting comparative studies across multiple schools or regions, incorporating the perspectives of multiple mentors, teachers, and parents. Employing mixed methods approaches—including longitudinal or experimental designs—could also enrich understanding and generate more robust generalizations. Additionally, further investigation into the long-term impact of spiritual intelligence on students' academic resilience, moral reasoning, and behavior beyond the school context would deepen the relevance and applicability of future research.

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