

Religious transformation and character: a phenomenological study of pesantren ramadan experience in high school

Ranti Ayu Sriwahyuni¹, Agus Fakhruddin², Cucu Surahman³

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia¹²³,

rantiayu@upi.edu¹, agusfakhruddin@upi.edu², cucu.surahman@upi.edu³

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Abstract

As modernisation accelerates and religious engagement among adolescents declines, there is an urgent need for Islamic education models that prioritise meaningful character transformation over mere cognitive instruction. This study examines the transformative impact of religiosity and character development on students and teachers participating in the Pesantren Ramadan (SMARTTREN) program at a public high school in Bandung. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The findings indicate that SMARTTREN functions as a comprehensive learning environment that fosters spiritual, social, and moral development. Teachers view the program as a means of role modelling and spiritual renewal. Concurrently, students reported increased discipline in worship, a stronger emotional and spiritual connection to Allah, and noticeable positive changes in their daily interactions. These results suggest that SMARTTREN is an effective contextual model of Islamic education in public schools, providing sustainable pathways to enhance students' religiosity and character formation. The program has significant potential for replication and integration into curricula in similar educational settings.

Keywords: Character, Religious Transformation, Pesantren Ramadan

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren Ramadan is a type of religious activity regularly held in schools during the holy month of Ramadan (Harahap et al., 2023). This programme extends beyond a simple religious agenda; it provides students with a space for spiritual and moral development. The primary goals of Pesantren Ramadan are to enhance religious understanding, introduce worship practices, and cultivate their religious character in a more reflective and transformative environment than traditional classroom settings (Efendi et al., 2023). Various activities, such as reciting the Qur'an, performing the dhuha and zuhur prayers in congregation, thematic studies, and mentoring, serve as ways to internalize applicable Islamic values (Prabowo et al., 2025). Therefore, Pesantren Ramadan plays a vital role in fostering character-based religiosity within the educational environment.

While Pesantren Ramadan holds great potential for character development and spiritual growth, its implementation in schools often fails to capture its core purpose. Instead, it is often regarded simply as an annual ceremonial task to meet administrative obligations (Fathoni, 2020). Several problems arise, including ineffective activity, weak internalization of religious values, and suboptimal teacher involvement (Defi, 2022). Activity evaluations are often mere formalities that overlook behavioral changes or spiritual significance that occur during the process. As a result, activities that could influence character are deprived of their deeper meaning. In the modern digital era, students face significant challenges, such as reduced religious discipline, rising consumerism, and moral decline (Lisa et al., 2020). This condition emphasizes that Pesantren Ramadan is not merely a temporary religious event but a process of spiritual and character development that leads students to deeper spiritual consciousness.

Several previous studies have demonstrated the significant role of Pesantren Ramadan in character development and transforming students' religious values. For example, the study *The Students' Religion Attitude: Study of Pesantren Ramadhan for Senior High School in Padang City* by Zaini et al (2020) The Pesantren Ramadan program improved students' religious attitudes by promoting consistent worship and moral values in daily life. Meanwhile, the study *Analysis of the Implementation of Strengthening Character Education Through Pesantren Ramadan* by Muflih et al (2022) emphasizes that Pesantren Ramadan activities can incorporate character education into school culture, fostering religious values, social

awareness, and integrity. A more recent study, *Promoting Moral and Religious Transformation: The Role of Pesantren Ramadan Programs in Preventing and Addressing Bullying in Educational Settings*, by Jenuri (2024) has been shown to promote empathy and effectively reduce bullying.

Previous studies above focus on measurable outcomes and success, often overlooking participants' personal religious experiences. This research aims to explore how meaning, transformation, and spiritual consciousness change through Pesantren Ramadan activities. The gap between goals and practice highlights the need to examine personal religious experiences. Teachers and students see activities as vital to their spiritual and social growth, emphasizing religious transformation. Educational practices should align with students' deeper awareness to foster worship, reflection, and social interaction during Pesantren Ramadan.

The phenomenological approach explores deep meanings, focusing on "lived experience" and conscious perception. In this study, teachers and students interpret Pesantren Ramadan through their consciousness. It employs a qualitative design, collecting data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data triangulation is used to improve accuracy by analyzing participants' experiences. The focus is on how SMARTTREN changes perceptions of religiosity and character through experiences in public schools.

This study offers two key contributions. Theoretically, it deepens understanding of experiential religious education by emphasizing the roles of teachers and students as active agents in their own growth. In practice, it aims to help schools develop Pesantren Ramadan programs that are more meaningful, reflective, and engaging for the digital generation. Rather than viewing Pesantren Ramadan as a temporary activity, it should be understood as an ongoing process for cultivating character and religiosity.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-phenomenological approach (Miles et al., 1994). The study explores and interprets transformational experiences, religious meanings, and characters observed in teachers and students during Pesantren Ramadan (SMARTTREN) at SMAN 1 Bandung. This method was selected because it emphasizes grasping the subjective meanings rooted in participants' reflective awareness rather than just providing a superficial description of activities (Neubauer et al., 2019). This study employed Husserlian

phenomenological principles, such as epoché (bracketing) and phenomenological reduction, to identify the essence of the experiences and characteristics observed during the program (Husserl, 1960).

The research was conducted over the seven days of SMARTTREN activities, specifically on March 6, 7, 14, and 17–20, 2025. The timing and order of data collection were adjusted to align with the school's activity schedule, minimizing disruption. All field procedures were performed after obtaining institutional permission and informed consent.

Data sources and collection techniques included triangulation sources and collection methods, which were implemented through triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) First, in-depth interviews with teachers and students explored their experiences and traced processes of value internalization and behavioral change during the SMARTTREN program. Second, participatory observation involved directly observing key activities such as worship practices, mentoring sessions, Qur'an recitation, and religious seminars, enabling the researcher to observe lived experiences in their natural environment. Third, document analysis examined school records, including activity schedules, program modules, SOPs, attendance lists, and other supporting documents, thereby enhancing the empirical strength of the findings.

The sampling strategy used was purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2016), Adapted to phenomenological objectives, teachers were chosen based on their operational roles within SMARTTREN, while students were selected according to minimum participation criteria—attendance of at least 80% during the SMARTTREN series (criterion e80%). This process ensures informants have enough reflective experience to provide valuable data. Data analysis combined phenomenological and qualitative methods, producing reflective findings. All responses were transcribed verbatim, with memos created to bracket original meanings. Transcripts and notes were then segmented into meaning units linked to themes of religious transformation and character development.

These units were interpreted into concise descriptions and organized into themes that capture teachers' and students' core experiences. The final step synthesized these themes into a narrative emphasizing SMARTTREN's impact and how school religious experiences shape values and character. This research offers insights into Pesantren Ramadan as a space for religious and character development in public schools, informing policy and the development of religious programs.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Religious Transformation through Various Pesantren Ramadan Activities at School

The SMARTTREN program at SMAN 1 Bandung demonstrates the school's dedication to fostering religious growth and character through spiritual activities. It aims to deepen understanding, raise awareness, and promote lasting morals. SMARTTREN creates an educational environment that integrates cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor dimensions through worship, value reinforcement, and reflection. It provides a platform for integrating Islamic values into modern education, thereby aligning knowledge, attitudes, and practices.

The SMARTTREN program spans seven days from March 6, 7, 14, 17-20, 2025. Activities alternate among the mosque, hall, and classrooms, involving Islamic Education teachers, school committees, P3K students, and all students. Despite common technical issues in significant events, students and teachers participate eagerly, making each activity a meaningful blend of religiosity and character growth. The following section outlines the SMARTTREN activities that facilitate this engagement.

The Habit of Shaking Hands

Shaking hands is a simple yet meaningful tradition in character and religious education. Every morning, teachers and students exchange handshakes at the entrance, symbolizing respect and connection. This tradition creates a warm atmosphere, encourages respect for educators, and enhances brotherhood among students. Phenomenologically, it transcends mere social custom, reflecting Islamic values like *ta'dzim* (respect) and *ukhuwah* (brotherhood).

From a cognitive affective perspective, this indicates an initial phase of internalizing values. Cognitively, students identify expected norms of respect, and affectively, repeated positive feelings reinforce social connections. This aligns with Bloom's affective taxonomy, indicating that students progress from merely receiving values to actively responding to them (Lubis et al., 2025).

Islamic Mentoring

Islamic mentoring is central to the SMARTTREN program, which aims to develop students' religiosity. Through dialogue, students participate in and reflect on Islamic values and contemporary teenage life. This style fosters two-way communication through small-

group discussions, thereby increasing engagement in conversations, Q&A, and activities. It also enables tailored instruction, allowing teachers to adapt examples and complexity to students' levels. Teachers act as facilitators, promoting understanding and deeper learning over rote memorization.

Table 1. Summary of SMARTTREN Material

Day	Main Theme	Learning Objectives	Methods/Notes
1	Introduction to Islam	Understanding the meaning of dien and its application	Group discussion
2	Birrul Walidain	Strengthening devotion to parents	Case studies & role-play
3	Al-Iman (Iman-Islam-Ihsan)	Mapping the dimensions of faith	Group reflective game
4	Islamic Morals	Cultivating social ethics	Simulation of manners & reflection
5	Tawazun	Maintaining physical and spiritual balance	Workshop
6	Love (priority of bonds)	Understanding the priority of love according to Islam	Discussion of values & reflective tasks

This mentoring material is crucial in the process of internalizing faith, helping students grasp Islamic values theoretically and connect them to real-life situations. Theoretically, this approach aligns with Kolb's concept of experiential learning in the research by Apriliana (2022) which emphasizes learning through practical experience, reflection, and the application of values in real-life situations. Mentoring activities at the Pesantren Ramadan can strengthen students' religious values, integrity, and social consciousness.

Dhuha and Praying Together

Dhuha and communal prayers are central to the SMARTTREN series, emphasizing students' spiritual and social growth. Conducted every morning with teachers as role models and a committee ensuring punctuality, this routine encourages sunnah worship, raising spiritual awareness and discipline. Group prayer fosters reflection, gratitude, and spiritual unity.

This activity exemplifies habituation, a concept in Islamic education theory, where consciously repeated actions develop character and moral habits (Octaviani & surana, 2024).

Dhuha prayer also serves as an exercise in self-control, time discipline, and spiritual self-reflection. Research by Nuha et al (2024) supports these findings by demonstrating that congregational worship, such as dhuha prayer, can enhance religious awareness and increase social empathy among students.

Joint Qur'an Recitation

Tadarus Al-Qur'an is a communal activity that integrates students' cognitive, spiritual, and social facets into a cohesive religious experience. Teachers and mentors serve as guides, emphasizing tajwid practice and providing contextual insights into the verses. These groups are structured to collectively cover all 30 juz of the Qur'an by the end of the SMARTTREN session. Reciting the Qur'an together symbolizes shared spirituality and unity in worship, thereby strengthening social bonds among students. It also teaches them to support one another's progress and to provide constructive feedback.

Table 2. Emotional response from student interview (semantic frequency)

No.	Emotional Response Category	Frequency Mention
1	Feeling supported	18 entries
2	Increased confidence	5 entries
3	Feeling anxious	2 entries

The emotional impact of tadarus exemplifies social learning theory, demonstrating that observing supportive peers increases motivation and confidence. It emphasizes that reading the Qur'an is more than a daily practice; it strengthens one's bond with Allah. This is consistent with the findings of Surahman et al (2025), who confirm that collective religious activities, such as tadarus, are crucial for enhancing the quality of worship. Therefore, SMARTTREN promotes students' religious commitment habits.

Religious Seminar

Religious seminars in the school auditorium offer a space for reflection, enhancing students' understanding of Islamic values relevant to modern life, such as digital ethics, leadership, and social responsibility. These seminars, featuring internal and external speakers, help students see Islam as a guide for navigating social changes.

This seminar provides a space for reflection on character development, where students examine their religious experiences during SMARTTREN and relate them to social

contexts. Compared with studies in which seminars were perceived as monotonous (Aldi & Khairanis, 2025) the engagement documented in the interview indicates higher relevance, as the themes aligned with students' real digital experiences rather than abstract doctrinal issues.

Closing Activities and Reflection

The SMARTTREN closing ceremony took place on the final day, featuring the usual routine and a reflection session with teachers and students. During this session, students were encouraged to share their impressions, messages, and any personal changes they experienced during the event.

Pedagogically, this reflection stage serves as a means of internalizing values that strengthen religious experiences into long-term habits (Sinaga & Mahariah, 2023). The closing ceremony was more than a moment for personal reflection; it also served as a gathering to recognize everyone involved, including teachers, committee members, and P3K members who helped implement the program. This event reinforced important values and teamwork, which are essential elements of *akhlaq jama'i* (collective morality) in Islam (Faqihuddin & Romadhon, 2023). Therefore, the closing ceremony serves as both the final event and the culmination of the communal religious and character-development journey by students and teachers during Pesantren Ramadan.

The Transformational Meaning of Pesantren Ramadan from the Teachers' Perspective

Teachers view SMARTTREN as more than an annual activity; it's an experience that fosters authentic religiosity. It provides a space for worship and spiritual connection, with activities such as *tadarus*, mentoring, and reflection that promote spiritual growth and professionalism. From a phenomenological perspective, SMARTTREN's importance lies in its integration of religious, social, and moral dimensions, thereby aiding character development. It serves as a spiritual and pedagogical space in which religious principles and social ethics are conveyed through interaction and role modeling.

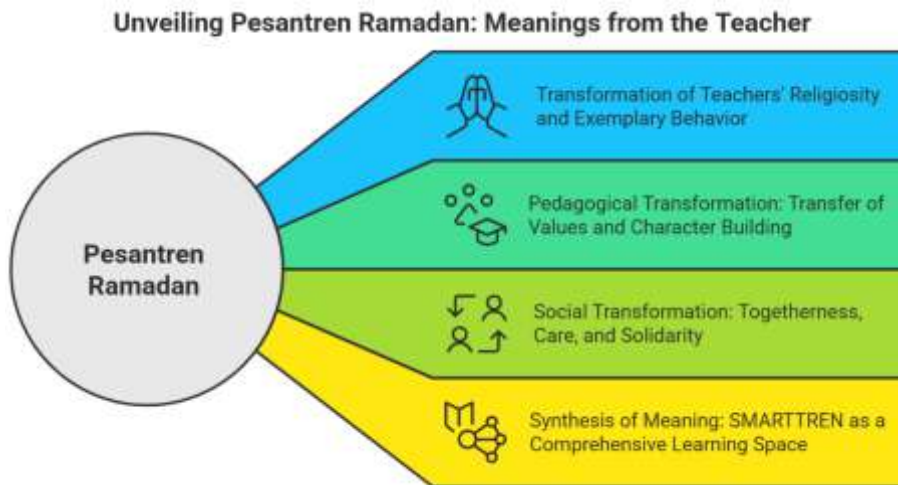


Figure 1. Visualization of the teacher's perspective on the meaning of Pesantren Ramadan
Transformation of Teachers' Religiosity and Exemplary Behavior

For teachers, engaging in religious activities like dhuha prayer, communal prayers, and Quran recitation fosters religious transformation and spiritual guidance. Within SMARTTREN, teachers experience renewed faith and spirituality. One teacher said, *"I personally feel closer to my students, while also improving my own worship habits. For example, I can pray dhuha together with others, recite the Quran more regularly, and feel the religious atmosphere at school."* By directly engaging, teachers can reinforce their personal religious values and convey this spirit to their students.

This view aligns with research Octaviani & surana (2024) That Pesantren Ramadan activities shape students' religious attitudes through exemplary teachers. In SMARTTREN, group prayers and Quran recitation foster a collective spiritual environment, strengthening religious education. Teachers view these activities as opportunities for self-reflection that enhance religious awareness and foster spiritual transformation.

Pedagogical Transformation: Transfer of Values and Character Building

Teachers see SMARTTREN as a space to transform values and character through a contextual approach. In thematic mentoring, they act as moral reflection facilitators, not just material conveyors. They connect Islamic values to youths' lives, including digital ethics, social interaction, and social responsibility. One teacher explained, *"Students learn directly from teachers about contextual Islamic values, so that their character can be formed gradually."*

Teachers believe that Islamic discussions in class help students see religion not merely as rules but as ethical principles applicable to real-world situations. However, unlike the elementary school context studied by Tohirin et al., 2025, SMARTTREN demonstrates that, at the high school level, role modeling serves both instructional and reflective purposes.

Social Transformation: Togetherness, Care, and Solidarity

Teachers highlight SMARTTREN's social role in building community and empathy through activities like handshakes, group Quran recitation, and joint prayers, strengthening relationships and compassion. One teacher said, *"There has been an increase in awareness and discipline, although not one hundred percent. However, there has been a noticeable improvement in attitude, such as being more polite and respecting time."* This finding supports research by Faqihuddin & Romadhon, (2023) That Pesantren Ramadan activities can foster empathy and reduce negative behaviors such as bullying. At SMAN 1 Bandung, teachers have seen a more friendly and cooperative social climate after SMARTTREN.

Synthesis of Meaning: SMARTTREN as a Comprehensive Learning Space

Teachers view SMARTTREN as a space for religious and character growth, combining spiritual, social, and moral elements to promote Islamic values in daily school life. One teacher remarked, *"SMARTTREN is a valuable shared experience. The key lesson is that students need more than just theory; they also benefit from firsthand experience of communal worship. This becomes their resource in daily life."* This highlights that SMARTTREN is not merely an annual religious ritual but a learning platform that connects faith, reason, and action.

This reflects the idea of integrative tarbiyah, in which knowledge (cognition), emotional respect (affect), and physical practice (behavior) together constitute a comprehensive approach to Islamic education. SMARTTREN also incorporates Qur'anic principles into practical teaching methods, aligning with the findings of Surahman (2019) which underscores that the foundations of Islamic education, both theological and epistemological, should be grounded in the Qur'an's experiences and values.

The Transformational Meaning of Pesantren Ramadan from the Students' Perspective

For students, participating in Pesantren Ramadan is more than a routine of worship; it is a journey of personal growth that involves spiritual reflection, character development, and the reinforcement of social values.

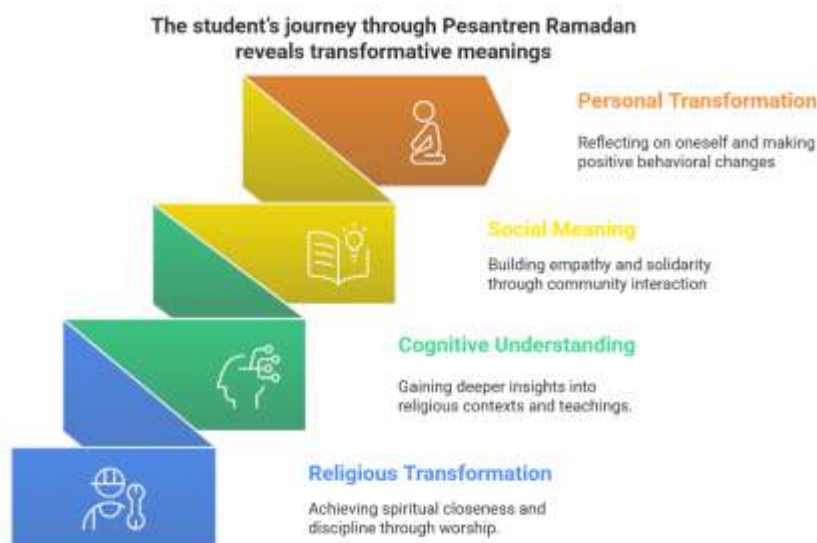


Figure 2. Visualization of students' perspectives on the meaning of Pesantren Ramadan

SMARTTREN distinguishes itself from traditional learning activities by being more peaceful and relaxed, thereby allowing students to focus on their personal development. One student said, *"After participating in this activity, I feel that my understanding of religion has increased, my worship habits have improved, and I feel closer to my friends and teachers. In addition, this activity also trains me to be more disciplined, patient, and to value time more in worship."* This statement shows the emergence of a personal and reflective religious awareness.

Religious Transformation: Spiritual Closeness and Worship Discipline

Regular worship helps them develop once inconsistent habits. One student admitted, *"The change is that I am more serious in my prayers. In the past, I was sometimes in a hurry, but now I try to be more solemn and understand the recitation."* This shows that repeated religious experiences during SMARTTREN have led to the internalization of values through habituation.

Students perceive congregational activities as fostering both vertical (*habluminallah*) and horizontal (*habluminannas*) closeness simultaneously. One student remarked, *"I feel more motivated to worship because I enjoy doing it with my friends."* Engaging with teachers during religious activities can foster a sense of religious intimacy that is not typically present in regular learning experiences. This meaning aligns with the research Sriwahyuni (2025) which indicates that a communal religious setting can significantly integrate role models, routines, and shared emotional experiences.

Cognitive and Reflective Meaning: Religious Contextual Understanding

Besides the spiritual aspect, students undergo cognitive change through thematic mentoring activities. These sessions serve as opportunities for reflection in which students connect religious teachings to the realities of modern life. One student said, *"Mentoring feels like a sharing session because we can ask questions on many topics that are relevant to teenage life."*

This participatory learning experience shapes reflective awareness, where students reflect on the meaning of each teaching and its application in life. Sunardi et al (2024) also confirm that a participatory and reflective approach proves effective in developing critical and reflective characters. In the SMARTTREN context, students recognize that religious learning extends beyond theory; it serves as a practical guide to life relevant to their experiences.

Social Meaning: Togetherness, Empathy, and Solidarity

Group activities such as reciting the Quran, handshakes, and praying help build strong social bonds among students. These shared experiences generate feelings of warmth, unity, and solidarity, which are rarely observed in school setting routines. *"In general, I am very grateful to be able to participate in these activities. I feel closer to my religion, my friends, and my teachers."*

These experiences foster social values like respect and appreciating differences. For example, in tadarus, students learn patience, listening, and giving constructive feedback, which develop empathy and teamwork. This aligns with the findings of Mutmainah et al (2024), which confirms that integrating social and cultural elements into the IRE learning environment can improve social cohesion, communication, and respect for differences.

Personal Transformation: Self-Reflection and Behavioral Change

For many students, SMARTTREN served as a turning point in establishing new habits and improving existing behaviors. These changes were evident in increased discipline in worship, patience, and self-control. One student said, *"The change is that I am more diligent in participating in jama'ah prayers. I used to pray alone, but now I pray together with others more often."*

This change shows students internalize religious values through direct experience (experiential internalization). They also reported feeling calmer and more motivated to improve because of this activity *"I am used to reducing bad words, and after Ramadan, they have also decreased."* Consistent with Faqihuddin et al. (2024), SMARTTREN activities indicate that

religious education is most effective as a tool for cultural change rather than for the transmission of doctrine. Educators guide students to adopt values that shape daily behavior.

Meaning Synthesis: SMARTTREN as a Space for Shaping Students' Religious Identity

Overall, students see SMARTTREN as a process of spiritual self-transformation that integrates spiritual, intellectual, and social elements. It provides a practical platform for students to explore religion and cultivate human values. One student concluded, *"I feel many benefits after participating in this activity, such as increased religious understanding, better worship habits, and closeness with friends and teachers. In addition, this activity also trained me to be more disciplined, patient, and more appreciative of time in worship."*

For students, SMARTTREN represents an inner journey that fosters spiritual and moral growth. This underscores the importance of experiential religious learning in Islamic education, in which values are understood through lived experience. Prabowo et al., (2025) Highlight that Pesantren Ramadan, if well managed, can develop a younger generation that is pious, compassionate, and character-oriented. At SMAN 1 Bandung, SMARTTREN functions as a transformative educational space that links religiosity with human values, fostering students who are faithful, moral, and driven by values.

CONCLUSION

The Pesantren Ramadan (SMARTTREN) activities in schools extend beyond an annual religious event; they serve as a transformative educational experience that develops learners' spiritual, cognitive, social, and moral dimensions. The results show that activities such as dhuha prayer, tadarus, mentoring, and group reflections serve as experiential means of embedding religious values and promoting discipline, empathy, and responsibility. Teachers view SMARTTREN as a meaningful space for role modeling and value transmission, which also enhances their spiritual awareness and teaching identity. Students perceive participation in SMARTTREN as leading to notable changes in their worship habits and emotional connection with Allah, both of which reinforce their religious identity and character.

Pesantren Ramadan can be seen as an effective form of experiential Islamic education that promotes religiosity and character development through lived, reflective, and context-

Based engagement. This research emphasizes that, when integrated into a public-school setting, Pesantren Ramadan becomes a space where ritual practices become meaningful moral experiences and spiritual growth through shared understanding rather than mere instruction. The results highlight the importance of designing programs that focus on value transformation rather than just ceremonial completion. Future studies could investigate broader school environments or use longitudinal methods to assess ongoing religious and character development beyond the program.

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