

## Religious character development in elementary schools in Palembang: a comparative study

Sabrina Syifaurrehman\*, Jefpi Milda, Khairunnisa, Fahmi Mandala Putra, Muhamad Fauzi, Ismail Sukardi

Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author:

Sabrina Syifaurrehman, e-mail: [sabrinasyifaurrehman\\_24052160014@radenfatah.ac.id](mailto:sabrinasyifaurrehman_24052160014@radenfatah.ac.id)

**Abstract.** This study compares the implementation of religious character development at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang and SD Negeri 74 Palembang. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with a comparative study method, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation. The analysis involved data collection, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that both schools approach religious character development seriously and sustainably, but with different methods based on their institutional backgrounds. SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang adopts an integrated and systematic approach, embedding Islamic values across all educational activities, combining formal and non-formal programs, and emphasizing a religious atmosphere through a Muhammadiyah curriculum. Teachers also play a role as spiritual mentors. In contrast, SD Negeri 74 Palembang focuses on structured and measurable religious programs such as KAREYASO activities, the “7 Habits of Great Indonesian Children” journal, and active involvement from all school components. This research indicates that both religious-based and public schools can effectively foster religious character, provided they have committed leadership, structured programs, and strong support from school staff and parents.

**Keywords:** *Character Development, Religious Character, Elementary School, Students*

**Abstrak.** Penelitian ini membandingkan implementasi pengembangan karakter religius di SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang dan SD Negeri 74 Palembang. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode studi komparatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Analisis dilakukan dengan mengumpulkan data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kedua sekolah mengembangkan karakter religius dengan serius dan berkelanjutan, namun dengan pendekatan yang berbeda berdasarkan latar belakang institusional mereka. SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang mengadopsi pendekatan yang terintegrasi dan sistematis, menanamkan nilai-nilai Islam di seluruh aktivitas pendidikan, menggabungkan program formal dan non-formal, serta menekankan suasana religius melalui kurikulum Muhammadiyah. Guru juga berperan sebagai mentor spiritual. Sebaliknya, SD Negeri 74 Palembang fokus pada program religius yang terstruktur dan terukur seperti kegiatan KAREYASO, jurnal “7 Kebiasaan Anak Indonesia Hebat”, dan keterlibatan aktif dari seluruh komponen sekolah. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa baik sekolah berbasis agama maupun sekolah negeri dapat secara efektif membina karakter religius, asalkan mereka memiliki kepemimpinan yang berkomitmen, program yang terstruktur, dan dukungan yang kuat dari staf sekolah dan orang tua.

**Kata Kunci:** *Pengembangan Karakter, Karakter Religius, Sekolah Dasar, Siswa*

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## **Introduction**

Education is a conscious and planned effort to create a learning environment and learning process that enables students to actively develop their potential. Education is a fundamental process in improving the quality of human life in various aspects, for example by instilling morals in humans (Tafsir, 2004).

National education aims to develop the potential of students to become people who are faithful and devoted to God Almighty, have noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, skilled, creative, independent, and become democratic and responsible citizens. To achieve these goals, the education sector must pay attention to character building in students in this modern era. In Indonesia, issues related to the character or morals of the nation's children have become the public spotlight, causing social ills or cases of violence, theft, abuse of illegal drugs such as narcotics and other illegal drugs, pornography, cheating, and promiscuity among students (Esmael & Nafiah, 2018).

The root of all evil and bad actions, criminal acts, lies in the loss of character. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture's Language Center (Amri, Jauhari, & Elisah, 2011), character is innate, the heart, soul, personality, morals, behavior, personality, nature, temperament, and disposition.

Character is understood as the unique way of thinking and behaving of each individual in living and working together, whether within the family, community, nation, or state (Samani & Hariyanto, 2012). Samani and Hariyanto define character as the fundamental values that shape an individual's personality, formed by both hereditary and environmental influences, distinguishing them from others, and manifested in their attitudes and behaviors in daily life. According to Scerenko (as cited in Samani & Hariyanto, 2012), character is an attribute or characteristic that shapes and distinguishes the personal traits, ethical traits, and mental complexity of an individual, a group, or a nation.

Character education can provide students with the ability to use and improve their knowledge, internalize and examine, and personalize character values and noble morals so that they are achieved in daily behavior. Religious values are one of the values found in character education. Religious values are closely related to religious values because religious values originate from religion and enter into the soul of a human being. These religious values are eternal and absolute, and originate from one's inner beliefs. Students' character can lead to complete self-acceptance. A strong character can be a good foundation for developing a deep national awareness, while a good national awareness can shape an individual's character. The importance of strengthening national awareness is expected to be achieved through strengthening students' national awareness (Jannah, 2023).

Character is synonymous with morals, which are basic human traits that influence one's personality. With character or morals, a person can predict their reactions to various phenomena that arise within themselves or in their relationships with others, in various circumstances, and how to control them. Character education is an effort made by schools to shape, direct, and guide the behavior of students in accordance with values derived from certain norms (Aqib in Zahro et al., 2017).

The instilling of these values, such as religious values, will ultimately determine the formation of students' personalities and morals, which are also influenced by their surroundings, including formal, informal, and non-formal environments. Religious character education is a

strategy for shaping children's behavior, where religious character education is the foundation for creating a generation with morals and noble character.

Religious character education is first implemented in the home and school environments, where parents and schools play an important role in shaping children's religious character. Religious character is an attitude and behavior that is obedient in carrying out the teachings of the religion they adhere to, tolerant of the practice of other religions, and living in harmony with other religious adherents.

Through religious character education, it is hoped that students will be able to independently develop and utilize their knowledge, as well as be able to examine, appreciate, and internalize religious character values and noble morals, which will then be manifested in their daily behavior. Elementary schools (SD) have a very strategic position in the Indonesian education system because they serve as the foundation for all levels of education. Therefore, improving the quality of basic education will automatically contribute to improving the quality of education at the next level. As the initial level of education, elementary schools have a strategic role in instilling religious values in students. This condition encourages schools to become strategic places in shaping students' religious character.

Previous studies have discussed the development of religious character in elementary schools. For example, a study by Rahman (2020) showed that the implementation of character education programs in Muhammadiyah elementary schools can increase students' self-confidence and leadership (Rahman, 2020). Another study by Hidayat (2018) found that public schools tend to face challenges in implementing religious character education effectively, especially in terms of parental and community involvement (Hidayat, 2018).

However, despite the existence of several studies on this topic, there is still a lack of studies that directly compare the strategies and approaches used in religious character development between private religious schools and public schools. SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang and SD Negeri 74 Palembang are two popular elementary schools with high enrollment rates every year. The principal revealed that at SDN 74 Palembang, the number of new student applicants reached 200, but the available quota was only 120, so it was always full, while SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang always filled its class quota with 70 new students every year, even though they had to pay, according to the principal of SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang.

This phenomenon demonstrates the high level of trust the community has in these two educational institutions. The classes are always full because both schools have advantages, including the fact that many of their graduates are accepted into the top public junior high schools in Palembang.

Furthermore, the principal revealed that graduates from SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang are often accepted into SMPN 61, SMPN 31, and SMPN 15 Palembang, while graduates from SD Negeri 74 Palembang are often accepted into SMPN 1, SMPN 7, and SMPN 15 Palembang. In addition to producing competent graduates, students from both schools also exhibit religious values and behavior. This is evident from the students' polite and respectful demeanor, as well as their ability to read the Quran during the researcher's observations. This is the reason why parents are eager to enroll their children in these two schools.

Furthermore, the implementation of religious character education in schools can vary depending on the school's vision, mission, and culture. Religious-based schools, such as SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang, generally have a more structured approach in shaping students'

religious character. On the other hand, public schools like SD Negeri 74 Palembang also integrate religious values into their learning activities and school culture, albeit with a different approach.

The differences in background and management between the two types of schools make them interesting subjects for comparative study. This research aims to compare the development of religious character at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang with SD Negeri 74 Palembang, in terms of strategies, programs, and implementation outcomes. This study is important to assess the effectiveness of each school's approach in shaping students' religious character and to provide recommendations for strengthening religious character education at the elementary school level in general.

## **Methods**

The research method employed in this study is a qualitative approach using a comparative study design. This study was conducted in two distinct elementary schools, SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang and SD Negeri 74 Palembang, chosen for their differing educational approaches: one being religion-based and the other being general education. The selection of these schools allows for a comparative analysis of how religious character development is implemented in diverse educational settings.

Data collection was carried out through multiple techniques, including semi-structured interviews with key informants such as school principals, religion teachers, and parents of students. These interviews provided insights into the implementation and perception of religious character development programs. In addition to interviews, direct observations were made of the teaching and learning processes, as well as extracurricular activities related to religious character development, in both schools. This allowed for an in-depth understanding of how religious values are taught and applied in the students' daily lives.

For data analysis, the Miles and Huberman model was employed, which involves three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2023). In the reduction stage, data were categorized into relevant themes based on the information obtained from interviews and observations. In the presentation stage, the data were systematically displayed to facilitate comparison. Finally, a descriptive comparison was conducted to identify similarities and differences in the approaches to religious character development in both schools, and conclusions were drawn based on the findings. This methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of the practices and strategies employed by both schools in fostering religious character in students.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Religious Character Development at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang*

The formation of religious character among students at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang is fully supported by the school's vision, mission, and culture based on Islamic values. The principal stated that the institution's mission is "to shape Muslim individuals who are noble, confident, capable, and useful to religion, society, and the state." This mission is realized through integrated development programs in the school's routine, both formally through lessons and informally through daily activities.

SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang has an integrated approach to religious character development, which is more structured compared to public schools like SD Negeri 74 Palembang. Data from the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) shows that religious-based private schools often implement more systematic character-building programs (Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud), 2021). For example, SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang implements a curriculum that integrates religious education into every subject. In addition, there are additional subjects such as Al-Islam, Kemuhammadiyah, Arabic, and Quran reading and writing.

Some of the religious programs routinely carried out at this school include daily activities such as Quran recitation, which is held every Tuesday and Wednesday morning before the learning process begins. These activities are directly guided by teachers, with students taking turns as facilitators. This not only trains their ability to read the Quran but also instills a sense of responsibility and leadership. Furthermore, the school requires students to attend congregational Zuhur prayers daily at the nearby mosque. The schedule is arranged based on class rotation, and the activity is conducted in a disciplined manner under teacher supervision. SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang also has weekly activities, namely dhuha prayer together in the school field, followed by tadarus accompanied by all teachers.

On religious holidays, activities such as the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, the Isra and Mi'raj, a short Islamic boarding school, and Islamic competitions during Ramadan are also held. In addition to daily, weekly, and religious holiday activities for students, teachers and staff at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang are also provided with regular monthly religious activities, namely religious lectures for teachers and staff, which are held by the foundation.

Religious teachers at this school play an active role not only in delivering instructional material but also as role models in religious practices. The strategies employed by teachers focus on fostering habits and motivation, such as providing constructive advice and gentle reprimands when students fail to demonstrate the expected religious behavior. Teachers also continuously monitor the development of students' religious behavior, such as in the recitation of juz 30 and the performance of daily prayers. This shows that the process of religious character building in this school is personal and contextual rather than formalistic.

Parents contribute positively to supporting religious programs at school. They believe that their children have experienced significant changes in religiosity, such as being more diligent in performing religious rituals and becoming more fluent in reading the Qur'an. Parents are also involved in school religious activities, such as the Prophet's Birthday celebration, and receive regular reports from teachers regarding their children's progress in religious rituals and memorization.

Moral support and active involvement of parents are important factors in the sustainability of religious character building in the family environment. Meanwhile, interviews with students showed that they enjoyed religious activities carried out at school, especially reciting the Qur'an and praying in congregation. Students admit that they feel closer to Allah and are accustomed to performing religious practices both at school and at home. For example, students are accustomed to reading the Qur'an after Maghrib prayers at home and reminding their friends to continue their religious practices. This indicates that religious values have been instilled in the students' lives, both spiritually and socially.

*Religious Character Development at SDN 74 Palembang*

SD Negeri 74 Palembang has a main vision in shaping the religious character of students, namely “to improve a generation with noble character, healthy, achieving, mastering science and technology, and environmentally aware,” with the mission of “increasing faith and piety” and “cultivating character education.” This vision and mission are outlined in a series of structured routine activities that cover various aspects of students’ religious life at school. The principal explained that activities to build faith and piety are carried out through daily, weekly, and monthly programs that are designed to become habits. Every morning before classes begin, students participate in the “zero hour” activity, which includes reciting prayers, reading short suras, and other religious activities targeted by the class teacher, such as completing the Iqro’ program or memorizing specific suras within a semester.

At the weekly level, the school has a KAREYASO (Karakter, Yasin, Shalat/Character Building, Yasin, and Prayer) program, which consists of activities to develop the habit of reading Surah Yasin, performing Dhuha prayer together, and listening to religious lectures. Interestingly, these activities actively involve students, such as becoming imams, speakers (kultum), and prayer leaders, accompanied by teachers and the principal. Additionally, monthly activities such as commemorating major Islamic holidays (Maulid Nabi, Isra’ Mi’raj, Nuzulul Qur’an) are held with the participation of external figures, Islamic storytellers, and orphaned children.

The school also encourages students to be socially aware through a Friday donation program based on the principle of “from students to students,” where the funds collected are used to help other students who are experiencing misfortune or illness. Religious teachers play an important role in shaping students’ religious character through a contextual approach and by setting a good example. Religious education is not limited to the transmission of knowledge but also includes the cultivation of religious behaviors such as praying before and after lessons, greeting others, and showing respect and care for one another. Teachers also observe students’ religious character development in their daily lives, including how they perform religious rituals, interact with peers, and handle challenges. The school also appoints religious teachers as mentors for students who have difficulty practicing religious values, and the approach used is one of guidance, not punishment. The curriculum implemented by SD Negeri 74 is a general curriculum, namely the independent curriculum, in which Islamic Religious Education is separate from other subjects.

Parental involvement in religious activities at school is quite high. They provide full support, especially in competitions and celebrations of important Islamic holidays. Parents stated that their children showed improvement in their diligence in worship and their daily manners. They hope that the religious program at this school will continue to be developed in order to strengthen their children’s piety and morals.

From the students’ perspective, they enjoy group Quran recitation activities because they believe it increases their rewards. They acknowledge that teachers at the school set a good example in behavior and worship, helping them feel closer to Allah. Good habits learned at school are also carried home, such as performing the five daily prayers. Students also model good behavior for one another and remind their peers about worship and moral conduct. In general, the religious character of students at SD Negeri 74 Palembang is shaped through habit formation, role modeling, and active involvement of the entire school community, including teachers, students, and parents. Despite being under the auspices of a public school, the religious

approach applied demonstrates the school's seriousness in instilling values of faith and piety consistently and sustainably.

### *Comparison of Religious Character Building Approaches in the Two Schools*

The results of this study indicate that religious character building at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang and SD Negeri 74 Palembang is carried out seriously and continuously. SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang explicitly makes Islamic values the main foundation of its vision and mission. The goal is to shape "Muslim individuals with noble character, self-confidence, competence, and usefulness to religion, society, and the state." This vision is not merely a document but is implemented in all school activities. Meanwhile, SD Negeri 74 Palembang has a vision emphasizing balance between religious character, academic achievement, health, and environmental awareness. Although more general, the missions of "enhancing faith and piety" and "nurturing character education" indicate a focus on religious values.

SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang integrates Islamic values into all subjects. In addition to formal lessons, there are additional subjects such as Al-Islam, Kemuhammadiyahan, Arabic, and Reading and Writing the Qur'an. The curriculum is integrative, combining cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in an Islamic context. Meanwhile, SD Negeri 74 Palembang uses the Merdeka Curriculum, which is national and general in nature. Islamic Religious Education (PAI) stands as a separate subject. However, religious values are still encouraged through daily activities and habits. Religious activities at school can be a means of shaping a tolerant religious character. Moderate religious education in the school environment helps students not only to understand religious teachings in depth but also to develop an attitude of mutual respect in diversity (Milda, Munir, & Karomah, 2025).

In daily religious activities, SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang has a *tadarus* (Quran recitation) activity every Tuesday and Wednesday morning before lessons, as well as congregational Zuhur prayers carried out every day with a rotating class system. This habit is guided directly by teachers and carried out with discipline. At SD Negeri 74 Palembang, daily religious activities are held at 00:00 every morning, such as joint prayers, memorization of short surahs, and continuation of Iqro' reading. These activities are carried out before the main lessons begin and aim to build spiritual habits from the start of the day.

In addition, there are also weekly and monthly activities where SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang holds Dhuha prayers and recitation of the Quran every Friday, involving all teachers and students. In certain months, the school organizes *pesantren kilat*, commemorates important Islamic holidays, and holds various Islamic competitions. SD Negeri 74 Palembang is no less impressive with its weekly program called KAREYASO (Character, Yasin, Prayer), which consists of reciting Yasin, Dhuha prayers, and short religious lectures delivered by students in turns. These activities cultivate courage, leadership, and public speaking skills. Monthly events such as Maulid celebrations, Isra' Mi'raj commemorations, and Friday charity programs are also consistently held.

In terms of the role of teachers and coaching strategies, SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang positions teachers as role models for religion. Religious teachers not only teach but also monitor memorization, guide worship, and provide personal advice. The strategy is based on motivation and habit formation, not punishment. Meanwhile, SD Negeri 74 Palembang also positions teachers as religious role models. Religious teachers observe students' attitudes and worship, and

are appointed as mentors for students who have difficulties in worship. The coaching method is a contextual and exemplary approach.

The involvement of parents at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang includes participation in major events such as Maulid Nabi and providing regular reports on students' memorization and worship progress. Parents also stated that their children have become more diligent and obedient in worship at home. At SD Negeri 74 Palembang, it was noted that parental support is very high, especially in Islamic holiday celebrations and religious competitions. They also acknowledged positive changes in their children's worship and attitudes.

The impact on students at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang is that they have successfully instilled worship habits that continue at home. Students are accustomed to reading the Qur'an after Maghrib and remind each other to maintain their worship. And SD Negeri 74 Palembang has created students who are disciplined in prayer, enjoy reading the Qur'an, and show polite behavior. They also recognize teachers as role models in terms of religiosity.

Table 1: Comparison of Religious Character Development Approaches at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang and SD Negeri 74 Palembang

Aspect	SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang	SD Negeri 74 Palembang
Vision	Focus on shaping Muslims with noble character	Emphasizes balance: health, achievement, faith, and environmental awareness
Curriculum	Integrated Islamic values into all subjects	Merdeka Curriculum, Islamic Religious Education separate
Daily Activities	Quran recitation (Tadarus), Zuhur prayer	Zero hour: morning prayers, memorization, Iqro'
Weekly Activities	Dhuha prayer, Quran recitation, weekly gatherings	KAREYASO: Yasin, Dhuha prayers, religious lectures
Monthly/Special Activities	Maulid Nabi, Isra' Mi'raj, competitions, teacher recitations	Islamic holidays, charity, guest lectures
Teacher's Role	Role models, motivation, memorization monitoring	Religious role models, mentoring, contextual guidance
Development Strategies	Habituation, motivation, personal and contextual approaches	Role modeling, observation, encouragement without punishment
Parental Involvement	Active in religious events and reports	High support, especially in competitions and holidays
Impact on Students	Students develop religious habits at home	Discipline in worship, emulation of teacher behavior

The integration of religious character building through these comprehensive strategies supports the holistic development of students at both SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang and SD Negeri 74 Palembang. In Lickona's (1991) character theory, effective character formation involves three main components, namely moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. All three must be integrated into school life, not only in religious subjects. In this case, SD



Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang and SD Negeri 74 Palembang have implemented these principles through habits that touch on the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of students in their daily activities.

Program planning at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang is comprehensive and integrated, involving all elements of the school and developed from a strong Islamic vision. The program is designed with a tiered approach (daily–annual), based on habit formation, role modeling, and contextual learning. SD Negeri 74 Palembang has also demonstrated program planning (KAREYASO, scheduled memorization), teacher and parent involvement, and evaluation through habit journals. This is also in line with the research by Cahyaningrum & Suyitno (2022) and Rahayu et al. (2021), which states that a good religious character program is systematic, sustainable, involves all stakeholders, and has clear evaluation tools.

Basic education is the primary gateway in the educational process, significantly shaping students' development in intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects (Syifaurrehman, Munir, & Karoma, 2024). At this stage, education should not only focus on cognitive achievements but also encompass affective and psychomotor aspects, which form the foundation of character development. One important aspect of character education is the development of religious character, which is the internalization of religious values into students' daily attitudes and behavior. Religious character education from an early age is crucial because it can shape a personality that is noble, responsible, and has spiritual awareness in living life. Elementary schools have a strategic role in instilling religious values through the curriculum, habits, and a supportive learning environment. This is in line with Sugiharto's (2017) opinion, which states that the school environment must support the growth of character values through role modeling, habits, and a reward system.

In terms of religious learning, the contextual approach (contextual teaching and learning) as implemented at SD Negeri 74 Palembang has been effective in instilling religious values because it involves students' real experiences and builds relevant understanding (Wildan, Mutaqien, & Hamami, 2023). At SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang, students recite Juz 30 of the Quran in the context of their daily lives. Teachers not only ask students to memorize verses from the Quran, but also explain the meaning and relevance of the verses to their lives.

## **Conclusion**

Religious character building at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang and SD Negeri 74 Palembang is carried out seriously and continuously, but with different approaches based on their respective institutional backgrounds. SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang emphasizes an integrated and systematic approach that incorporates Islamic values into all aspects of education. This school consistently combines formal and non-formal activities in a strong religious atmosphere, supported by a distinctive Muhammadiyah curriculum, structured daily and weekly activities, and the role of teachers as spiritual guides. The involvement of parents and the foundation also strengthens the success of religious character building at this school. Meanwhile, SD Negeri 74 Palembang, although a public school with a national curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka), demonstrates a strong commitment to instilling religious values through programs such as the 0th period, the KAREYASO program, Friday donations, and celebrations of major Islamic holidays. The approach used is more flexible and contextual, with religion teachers serving as facilitators of character development. Both schools have successfully created students who have the habit of worshipping, demonstrate religious attitudes, and apply religious values in their daily

lives. However, the main difference lies in the depth of integration of religious values into the curriculum and school routines, where religious-based schools like SD Muhammadiyah tend to be more comprehensive in their implementation. Thus, both religious-based schools and public schools can be equally effective in fostering religious character among students, provided they have commitment, structured programs, and support from all school stakeholders and parents.

There are several recommendations that researchers need to convey, including 1) SD Muhammadiyah 2 Palembang needs to conduct routine evaluations of the effectiveness of existing religious programs so that they can be adapted to the needs and developments of the times, including innovations in character building methods that are more interesting and relevant to students. 2) SD Negeri 74 Palembang, which has an existing religious program that is already well-established, should maintain and further develop it through innovations in technology-based learning and cross-sectoral collaboration. 3) Researchers are advised to conduct long-term direct observations to obtain more in-depth and comprehensive data on the long-term impact of religious character education.

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