

CHARACTER AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN ISLAMIC SCHOOLING IN THAILAND

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Corresponding Author : 202206013@unars.ac.id

Kris Widiyanti^{1*}
202206013@unars.ac.id
Universitas Abdurachman
Saleh Situbondo,
Indonesia

Saleefah Tehyor²
salifat1673@gmail.com
Santiwit English Program
Department, Thailand

Abstract

This article reports on an international community service program conducted at Santiwit School, Songkhla, Thailand, that aimed at supporting holistic student development in a faith-based elementary school context. The partner institution is a private Islamic school implementing the Thai national curriculum integrated with Islamic values, with many of its students residing in a school dormitory. Using a Participatory Action Research approach, this community service program was implemented over two months through stages of observation, planning, implementation, monitoring, and reflection. Structured, routine-based, and some mentoring activities, including Hello Morning, Evening Light, ABC Fun Club, Friday Burdah, Move and Clean, and Khotmil Quran, were designed collaboratively with the school stakeholders. The findings indicate remarkable, positive changes in students' daily discipline, literacy skills, religiosity, social inclusivity, and environmental awareness. Ultimately, the study also demonstrates that participatory and context-sensitive community service programs can effectively support holistic education while simultaneously promoting long-term institutional sustainability and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: character education, Islamic education, literacy

INTRODUCTION

Santiwit School is a private educational institution located in Ban Na Village, Chana District, Songkhla Province, Thailand. Established in 2009, and like most other Islamic schools, Santiwit School was founded with the primary mission of providing accessible and quality basic education for the local community, particularly for Muslim families in the region. The institution integrates general education with Islamic values, positioning itself as a faith-based school that emphasizes academic achievement alongside moral integrity, character formation, and spiritual growth (Ilahi, 2025). The integration of Islamic values into general education is widely recognized as a holistic approach that supports balanced intellectual, ethical, and spiritual development among young learners (Hidayat et al., 2025; Sutisna et al., 2025).

Currently, Santiwit School serves approximately 300 kindergarten and elementary students, many from underprivileged backgrounds, including orphaned children residing in the school dormitory. Studies in faith-based educational contexts indicate that a positive school climate grounded in values-based practices and service learning can foster students' moral identity, wellbeing, and academic engagement. Furthermore, community-oriented school models that integrate academic and socio-emotional support are increasingly recognized for promoting whole-child development and reducing educational inequality among high-needs learners (Aldridge & McLure, 2024).

In its educational practice, Santiwit School implements the Thai national curriculum, which is adapted to align with Islamic teachings and character education principles. This is beneficial because such kinds of learning activities are designed to foster students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development while embedding values such as discipline, responsibility, respect, and religious devotion (Sholihah & Ariyani, 2025). Based on the School Work Plan for the 2025–2026 academic year, the institution has defined strategic priorities focused on improving academic quality, strengthening character education, utilizing the learning environment, and supporting holistic student development. Strategic planning plays a critical role in enhancing educational performance by providing a structured framework for goal setting, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation. Furthermore, the integration of holistic character education contributes to inclusive and quality education as it can foster students' moral values, responsibility, and cooperative skills alongside academic competence (Endo et al., 2025).

Despite the school's strong institutional vision, several challenges were identified during the preliminary observation before program implementation. These included inconsistent student discipline in daily routines, particularly during morning activities, variations in Quranic reading proficiency, and limited basic literacy skills among some students, especially younger learners and dormitory-residing orphans. Additionally, the school faced constraints in providing alternative spiritual activities for female students who were unable to perform prayers. Previous research indicates that limited implementation of religious extracurricular programs may reduce their effectiveness in fostering students' spiritual and social attitudes, particularly when student involvement and innovation are insufficient. This is supported by some research reporting that religious extracurricular activities have a significant influence on students' social attitudes (Lahmi et al., 2025), improve students' spiritual practices and moral behavior (Ramlianto et al., 2025), and develop tolerance, empathy, and strengthen moderation values among university students (Budiman et al., 2024).

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of community-based and participatory approaches in addressing similar challenges within school settings. Community engagement in the educational sector is very poor, despite the fact that schools maintain open communication with stakeholders in the educational sector.

Meanwhile, community-engaged research projects implemented in schools can effectively strengthen students' discipline, social responsibility, and critical awareness through sustained collaboration between schools and surrounding communities Kim (2024). She emphasizes that character development is most effective when learning activities are embedded within real-life social contexts and supported by structured mentoring.

In a related vein, Zamora (2023) explored the integration of community service learning into school curricula and found that such programs significantly improve students' literacy engagement, environmental awareness, and learning motivation. Besides, community service learning in schools can change schools' attitudes (Arnold, 1993), as it provides students with opportunities to participate in a service activity to meet social needs and simultaneously gain benefits for themselves (Truong et al., 2020). The study underscores the role of experiential and participatory learning in addressing foundational academic gaps, particularly among students from marginalized backgrounds. By engaging students directly in community-oriented activities, service learning fosters both academic competence and social consciousness.

Additionally, AlAli et al. (2025) examined the role of sustainability-oriented education in primary schools and reported that the integration of environmental practices into daily learning routines contributes to the development of students' environmental identity and pro-environmental behavior. Their findings suggest that environmental awareness is most effectively cultivated through habitual, school-wide activities rather than through isolated instructional interventions.

While these studies collectively demonstrate the positive impact of community engagement, service learning, and sustainability-based education on students' character, literacy, and environmental awareness, they primarily focus on single-dimensional outcomes or are situated within secular or non-faith-based school contexts. Limited attention has been given to international community service programs conducted within Islamic elementary school settings that simultaneously integrate character education, religiosity, literacy development, and environmental awareness.

Therefore, this program positions itself to address this gap by examining an international community service program implemented at Santiwit School, Thailand. By situating the program within a faith-based educational context and emphasizing cross-cultural collaboration between Indonesian university students

and the local school community, this study seeks to contribute a holistic perspective on how international community service can support integrated student development while strengthening intercultural understanding within the ASEAN educational landscape.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

The primary problems identified at Santiwit School relate to students' character formation, literacy development, spiritual engagement, and environmental awareness. Preliminary observations revealed limited discipline in students' daily routines, particularly in morning activities, which affected punctuality and readiness for learning. In addition, students exhibited uneven levels of Quranic literacy, with some demonstrating difficulties in pronunciation, fluency, and application of basic tajwid. Basic reading challenges were also observed among younger students, especially those residing in the dormitory, indicating gaps in foundational literacy skills. Furthermore, the school lacked structured spiritual activities for female students during specific conditions, potentially limiting their continuous engagement in religious practices. Alongside these issues, insufficient awareness of environmental cleanliness and healthy living habits remained a persistent concern within the school community.

In response to these interconnected challenges, an integrated set of solutions was designed to address academic, spiritual, and character-related needs in a holistic manner. To improve discipline, independence, and responsibility, the Hello Morning program was implemented through structured morning routines that encouraged students to develop consistent habits and time management skills. To strengthen students' religiosity and Quranic literacy, the Evening Light and Khotmil Quran programs were introduced, providing regular and guided opportunities for Quranic recitation, religious mentoring, and collective spiritual practice.

Basic literacy challenges were addressed through the ABC Fun Club, which focused on improving reading skills using interactive, student-friendly, and enjoyable learning methods. This approach aimed to reduce anxiety toward reading while fostering confidence and motivation among younger learners. In terms of spiritual inclusivity, the Friday Burdah program offered an alternative religious activity for female students unable to perform prayers, ensuring that all students remained engaged in spiritual routines aligned with the school's Islamic values.

To address environmental awareness and healthy habits, the Move and Clean program integrated physical exercise with environmental cleaning activities, promoting health, teamwork, and responsibility toward the school environment. Collectively, these solutions were designed to align with the school's vision and to support sustainable character development through participatory, culturally

sensitive, and student-centered approaches that actively involve students in their own learning and personal growth.

METHOD

The community service program was implemented over two months using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which emphasizes the active involvement of stakeholders in identifying problems, implementing solutions, and evaluating outcome (Salman & Ramsis, 2025). PAR is characterized by iterative and collaborative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, positioning community members as co-participants rather than passive beneficiaries. This approach was selected to ensure that the program was responsive to the actual needs of the school community and sustainable beyond the duration of the intervention, as PAR is widely recognized for promoting contextual relevance and long-term capacity building within educational and community settings.

The implementation process was structured into five interconnected stages: initial observation, program planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation, which align with the expanded PAR cycle commonly applied in community-based educational interventions. The observation stage was conducted during the early phase of the program to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' characteristics, daily routines, learning behaviors, and institutional conditions. Data were collected through direct interaction and informal interviews with teachers, dormitory supervisors, and school staff, as well as through non-participant observation of students' academic, religious, and social activities. This diagnostic phase corresponds to the PAR principle of jointly exploring contextual realities to inform subsequent action planning. The findings from this stage served as the empirical basis for identifying priority issues and determining appropriate program designs aligned with the school's educational context.

Based on the observation results, the program planning stage involved the formulation of structured activities tailored to students' academic, spiritual, and behavioral needs. Program implementation was carried out collaboratively between the service team and school stakeholders, reflecting PAR's emphasis on shared decision-making and collective ownership of the intervention process. Each activity was conducted regularly according to a predetermined schedule to promote consistency and habituation. The service team functioned as facilitators, mentors, and companions, guiding students throughout the activities, while teachers and dormitory supervisors provided contextual guidance, supervision, and reinforcement to ensure alignment with existing school routines. Students were positioned as active participants rather than passive recipients, fostering engagement, responsibility, and empowerment, which are central outcomes of participatory approaches.

Monitoring and evaluation were conducted continuously throughout the implementation phase to assess program effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. In line with participatory monitoring and evaluation principles, evaluation focused on observable indicators and reflective dialogue rather than solely on predetermined metrics. Indicators included students' discipline in daily routines, basic reading ability, Quranic fluency, participation rates in activities, and environmental cleanliness. Data were gathered through systematic observation and reflective discussions with teachers and staff. Reflection sessions were held at the end of the program to evaluate sustainability, document lessons learned, and formulate recommendations for future implementation. This cyclical process ensured that the program not only addressed immediate challenges but also contributed to long-term educational development at the partner institution, consistent with the transformative aims of PAR-based community interventions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the community service program indicate significant positive changes across multiple dimensions of student development, encompassing discipline, literacy, religiosity, inclusivity, and environmental awareness. These outcomes demonstrate that structured, routine-based, and participatory interventions can effectively support holistic education within a faith-based elementary school context.



Figure 1. Hello morning activities

One of the most evident impacts was observed in students' discipline and independence through the Hello Morning program. Approximately 75% of students demonstrated observable improvements in punctuality, readiness for school activities, and responsibility in managing their morning routines, as documented through systematic observation and reflective discussions with teachers and dormitory supervisors. This finding aligns with Kim (2024), who emphasizes that character development, particularly discipline and social responsibility, is most effectively cultivated through community-engaged and routine-based educational

practices. Similar to Kim's study, the success of Hello Morning was not merely attributed to rule enforcement but to consistent mentoring and the presence of role models who accompanied students in their daily routines. This suggests that habituation supported by social interaction plays a crucial role in internalizing disciplinary values.



Figure 2. Evening light and *khotmil Quran* activities

Improvements in students' religiosity were reflected in the outcomes of the Evening Light and Khotmil Quran programs. Students demonstrated better Quranic pronunciation, increased fluency, and greater enthusiasm toward religious activities. These results reinforce the importance of structured religious habituation in supporting students' spiritual development. While Kim (2024) focuses primarily on character and civic awareness in secular educational settings, the present study extends this perspective by showing that routine-based mentoring within a religious framework can simultaneously strengthen character and spiritual identity. The findings highlight that religiosity, when integrated into daily educational practices, can function as a reinforcing dimension of character education rather than as a separate instructional component.



Figure 3. ABC fun club activities

In terms of academic development, the ABC Fun Club program significantly supported students with limited literacy skills. Approximately 75% of participants demonstrated increased confidence and improved ability to recognize letters, read simple words, and engage in basic reading activities. This outcome closely corresponds with the findings of Zamora (2023) who argues that community service learning and experiential educational approaches are effective in addressing foundational literacy gaps, particularly among students from marginalized backgrounds. Both studies underscore that literacy development is enhanced when learning is delivered through interactive, supportive, and non-threatening environments. However, while Zamora (2023) situates literacy improvement within broader curriculum integration, the present study contributes additional insight by demonstrating the effectiveness of informal, routine-based literacy mentoring conducted outside formal classroom hours, particularly in dormitory-based school settings.

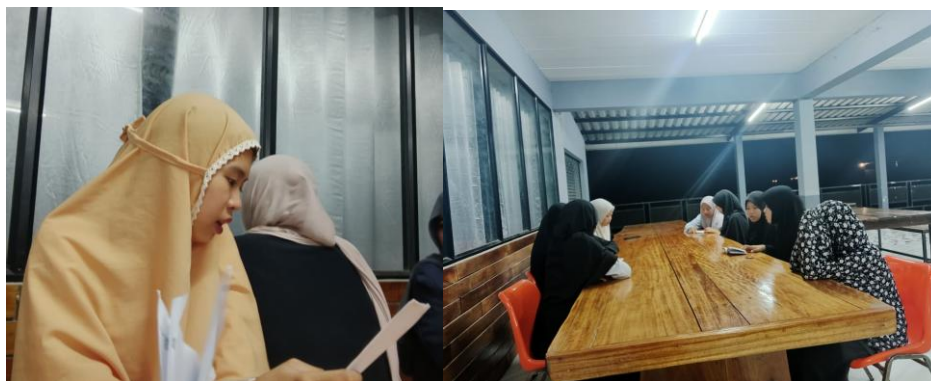


Figure 4. Friday *burdah* activities

Inclusivity and spiritual engagement were further strengthened through the Friday Burdah program, which provided alternative religious activities for female students who were unable to perform prayers. The program successfully maintained students' spiritual connection through religious poetry, fostering emotional engagement and character formation. This aspect of the findings offers a unique contribution compared to previous studies, as issues of inclusivity within religious routines are rarely addressed explicitly. While prior research largely discusses participation in general educational activities (Kim 2024; Zamora 2023), this study highlights the importance of designing spiritually inclusive practices that accommodate students' diverse conditions without marginalizing them from core institutional values.



Figure 5. Move and clean activities

Environmental awareness and social responsibility were effectively promoted through the Move and Clean program. Students actively participated in physical exercise and environmental cleaning activities, which contributed to improved teamwork, health awareness, and responsibility toward maintaining the school and dormitory environment. These findings strongly resonate with AlAli et al. (2025), who report that sustainability-oriented education embedded in daily school routines fosters students' environmental identity and pro-environmental behavior. Similar to AlAli et al. (2025) conclusions, this study confirms that environmental awareness is most effectively internalized through habitual, collective practices rather than isolated instructional sessions. The Move and Clean program functioned not only as an environmental activity but also as a medium for character education, reinforcing cooperation, discipline, and shared responsibility.

When examined collectively, the findings of this study reinforce and extend the insights offered by previous research. Kim (2024) emphasizes the role of community engagement in character formation; Zamora (2023) highlights the effectiveness of participatory service learning in addressing literacy and engagement; and AlAli et al., (2025) demonstrate the importance of routine-based sustainability practices in shaping environmental awareness. The present study integrates these dimensions within a single program conducted in a faith-based elementary school, thereby offering a more holistic perspective on student development.

Moreover, this study contributes a contextual novelty by situating community service within an Islamic educational environment and an international collaboration framework. While previous studies were largely conducted in secular or single-national contexts, the findings of this study demonstrate that community service programs can simultaneously enhance academic, spiritual, and environmental outcomes while also strengthening intercultural understanding. This integrated approach suggests that community service, when designed holistically and contextually, can function not only as a short-term intervention but as a

sustainable educational strategy for nurturing well-rounded students in diverse educational settings.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that a community service program implemented through a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach effectively supports holistic student development in a faith-based elementary school. Active stakeholder involvement across stages of observation, planning, implementation, monitoring, and reflection ensured that the program addressed contextual needs and promoted sustainability. Routine-based and participatory activities contributed positively to students' discipline, literacy, religiosity, inclusivity, and environmental awareness. Methodologically, the findings reaffirm the value of PAR as a responsive and adaptive framework for educational interventions. Contextually, this study highlights the potential of holistic, culturally grounded community service programs to foster well-rounded student development in diverse educational settings.

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