

CHARACTER EDUCATION IN INDONESIA: DO INTEGRATED ISLAMIC SCHOOLS OUTPERFORM PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

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ABSTRACT

Aim. Many parents in Indonesia currently believe that character education in Integrated Islamic Schools is superior to that in public schools. To support this belief, it is necessary to analyse students' character and compare the implementation of character education in these schools.

Methods. This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach and involved 1,024 students. In the study, the quantitative stage used the survey method, and the qualitative stage used the narrative method. The research analysed the character of discipline, creativity, independence, and caring. Questionnaires in character scales collected from the participants were analysed using Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) statistics. Document studies and interviews with vice principals were conducted to gain insight into implementing the character education programme at the school. The data obtained from this study were then analysed and integrated for further interpretation.

Results. The study results showed a significant difference in the character values of discipline, creativity, and caring between public and Integrated Islamic school students. However, the independence value was higher in Integrated Islamic school students than in public school students. The difference occurs because the programmes that support character independence in integrated Islamic schools are more varied.

The implementation of character education in public schools prioritises discipline, making students excel in this trait, even though the results of this study show only a minimal difference.

Conclusion. This study implies that parents who want their children to be more independent should go to Integrated Islamic schools, while to strengthen the character of discipline, parents can send their children to public schools. It is important to note that this study only focuses on character values: discipline, independence, creativity, and caring.

Keywords: character education, Integrated Islamic Schools, public schools, implementation, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia continuously strives to improve education quality to produce a generation of superior and characterful individuals. Education in the country focuses not only on strengthening cognitive and psychomotor abilities but also on improving the affective domain so that the profile of Pancasila students, which is the embodiment of the vision and mission of education, can be achieved (Jayadi et al., 2022; Soeharto et al., 2024). Therefore, the country's Ministry of Education and Culture issues new policies to achieve its educational goals, including implementing the Character Education Strengthening Program in schools (Rokhman et al., 2014).

Children's character is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors (Tennyson & Schwarze, 2023). In terms of environmental factors, characters are formed through interactions with surrounding people (Niccoli et al., 2024), known as imitation, through the process of seeing, hearing, and following (Seijts & Milani, 2023; Sugiarti et al., 2022). Therefore, the actual character can be taught or internalised intentionally through educational activities. In formal educational settings, schools can develop a curriculum based on character education (Safitri, Ansyari et al., 2022; Safitri, Muti'ah et al., 2022).

Making students with character is the task of educational institutions (Hanim & Marjo, 2024). The essence is building a whole person, character, and kind as adopted from the noble values of Pancasila. The values are fully integrated into human dignity (Salahudin & Alkrienciehie, 2013). Quoting Lickona's opinion, Samani Muchlas et al. (2013) proposed that character education must psychologically include the dimensions of moral reasoning, moral feeling, and moral behaviour. Other literature mentions that good character includes knowing the good, wanting the good, and doing the good—habits of mind, heart, and action habits (Kristjánsson et al., 2024; Lickona, 2012). Based on this understanding, character education is not just teaching or training about characters. Instead, it includes the aspects of understanding (cognitive skill) about goodness, motivation or desire (affective skill) to do good,

and action to do good (psychomotor skill) (Ji et al., 2021; Lidyasari, 2014; Timmermans & Rubie-Davies, 2019). Therefore, Education in Indonesia should instill cultural values such as discipline, creativity, independence, and care.

In 2004, Indonesia issued a new policy on regional autonomy, implying a decentralised education policy. Decentralised education refers to transferring authority from the central education organisation to education organisations below it (Supriyanta, 2018). Implementing such a system requires policies to improve each region's education quality. Therefore, schools can develop to achieve educational goals (Al-lam, 2021; Kameshwara et al., 2020; Melo-Becerra et al., 2020). In this case, private schools, including Integrated Islamic Schools, have great freedom to determine their direction.

In recent years, Integrated Islamic Schools, which integrate Islamic education and general education (Hildani & Safitri, 2021) and have a unique curriculum framework called the Integrated Islamic School Network, have been in high demand. The curriculum was developed to foster students' character, morality, competence, and skills (Rojii et al., 2019; Rustandi et al., 2023). Not only in big cities, the said schools have also proliferated in smaller regions due to their increasing number and public interest. Likewise, in Labuhanbatu Regency, parents' interest in sending their children to Integrated Islamic Schools has increased yearly. Schools frequently have to close their admissions earlier, even before the opening of public schools' admission, following the fulfillment of the quota. However, parents demanded additional quotas so their children could still be admitted, surprising the school management.

Even though the cognitive achievement of public school students is better than that of the Integrated Islamic Schools, parental interest in sending their children to public schools has decreased. This indicates that cognitive achievement is not the main factor for parents when choosing schools for their children. In addition, several interviewed parents mentioned sending their children to Integrated Islamic Schools because they are better at character building. However, the notion that character building in Integrated Islamic Schools is better than public schools needs to be examined. Therefore, this study analyses student character as the output of implementing student character education in middle schools. This study is limited only to the values of discipline, independence, creativity, and care among students at the middle school level. These character values were chosen because they represent the core of character education and align with educational goals in Indonesia.

Furthermore, these four characteristics are implemented in Integrated Islamic and public schools through different methods and systems. This allows this study to reveal the differences in meaning and outcomes of character education implementation in these schools. So, this research examines whether there are differences in the discipline, independence, creativity, and care of students between public and Integrated Islamic middle schools.

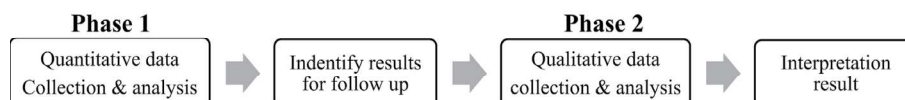
In the past, there was hope that private schools could create a positive environment for competition in the quality of both public and private schools. Several studies have explored public and private schools, including Coelli's research on the accountability of public and private schools, Alkaabi's research on the cost, quality, and achievement of students in private and public schools, Bagde's research on the impact of competition between public and private schools, or Yaacob's research on factors that influence parents' decision-making when selecting a private school for their children. However, none of these studies have examined the character values of students in public and private schools.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach, a research design that involves collecting and analysing quantitative data in the first phase. The results are then used to inform the design or development of the qualitative phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Morse, 2003). In this study, the quantitative stage used the survey method, and the qualitative stage used the narrative method.

Figure 1

Explanatory Sequential Design (Two-phase Design)



Source. Own research.

Quantitative Phase

This study involved students from public middle schools and Integrated Islamic middle schools in Labuhanbatu Regency. The quantitative phase used cluster random sampling, divided into public school and integrated Islamic school groups, with a total of 1.024 students. The schools selected for this study are nationally accredited institutions that have implemented character education programmes. Therefore, the students involved as participants have already received character education treatment from their respective schools. The sample was taken from last-grade students who had received character education in their respective schools. A complete description of the sample can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1*Description of Samples*

| Type of School | Sample Size | Description |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Public School | 512 | Last-grade |
| Integrated Islamic School | 512 | Last-grade |
| Total of Sample | 1.024 | - |

Source. Own research.

In this study, questionnaires with character scales were used as a quantitative data collection technique to measure students' four character traits: discipline, creativity, independence, and care. The validity (0,92) and reliability (0,87) of the character scales used were established through a pilot test before the study (Safitri et al., 2023). The data collected from the participants were analysed using Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) statistics. MANOVA was chosen for this analysis because it can detect minimal differences in each variable that cannot be revealed if the variables are analysed separately. Before conducting the multivariate analysis, an assumption test was carried out through a multivariate normality test and homogeneity test to ensure that the data analysed was normally distributed and homogeneous. MANOVA analysis identifies the differences in the values of discipline, creativity, independence, and care among students of both types of schools. Pillai's Trace test was used because the sample size was small. Pillai's Trace was chosen because it is considered the most robust test statistic and can provide reliable results (Johnson & Wichern, 2022; Kleinbaum et al., 2014). This test was used to measure the overall values of the characters. The test was conducted using the following formula (Seber, 1984).

$$\text{Pillai's trace} = \sum_{i=1}^q \frac{\lambda_i}{1+\lambda_i} = \text{tr} \lambda_i (1 + \lambda_i)^{-1} \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

The hypotheses of this study are as follows:

- Ha: There is a difference in the values of discipline, independence, creativity, and care between public school and Integrated Islamic school students ($\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$).
- Ho: There is no difference in the values of discipline, independence, creativity, and care between public school and Integrated Islamic school students ($\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$).

Qualitative Phase

During the qualitative data collection phase, we employed two main techniques: document studies and interviews with public and Integrated Islamic school vice principals. The vice-principals were chosen as informants because they are the implementers and coordinators of character education implementation in the schools. We conducted these studies to gain insights into implementing character education programmes

in schools. The data obtained from these studies was then analysed and integrated with the quantitative data for further interpretation based on the analysis of both (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; McKim, 2017; Migiro & Magangi, 2011).

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Quantitative Phase

This study uses a mixed methods approach, specifically an explanatory sequential design, which involves two phases of research: a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase. The quantitative phase of the study involved collecting data on the character values of students in public schools and Integrated Islamic schools. This data was analysed using descriptive statistical techniques and MANOVA. The results of the descriptive analysis include the mean and standard deviation for each character value. The mean in Table 2 represents a central measure describing each characteristic's average value. The standard deviation indicates the extent of variation or dispersion of the data from the mean. Meanwhile, N represents the number of participants involved in the measurement. Below are the results of the descriptive analysis from the questionnaires using the character scale.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistical Data

| Character values | Type of school | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
|------------------|---------------------------|------|----------------|-----|
| Discipline | Public school | 3.13 | 0.59 | 512 |
| | Integrated Islamic school | 3.03 | 0.70 | 512 |
| Independence | Public school | 2.77 | 0.92 | 512 |
| | Integrated Islamic school | 3.20 | 0.89 | 512 |
| Creativity | Public school | 2.76 | 0.91 | 512 |
| | Integrated Islamic school | 2.67 | 1.09 | 512 |
| Care | Public school | 3.57 | 0.75 | 512 |
| | Integrated Islamic school | 3.79 | 0.56 | 512 |

Source. Own research.

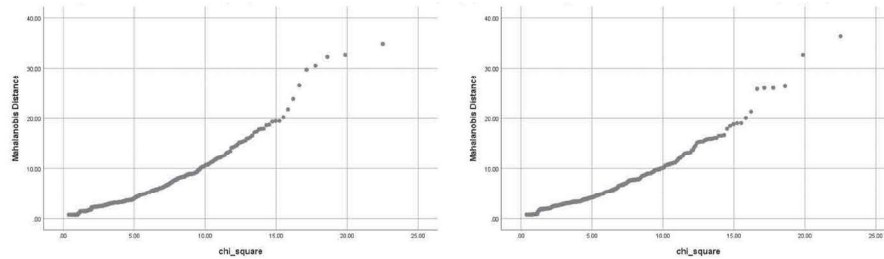
According to Table 2, public schools' mean values for discipline, independence, creativity, and care are 3.13, 2.77, 2.76, and 3.57, respectively, while those in Integrated Islamic schools are 3.03, 3.2, 2.67, and 3.79, respectively. The standard deviations for these character traits in public schools and Integrated Islamic schools are 0.59 and 0.70 for discipline, 0.92 and 0.89 for independence, 0.91 and 1.09 for creativity, and 0.75 and 0.56 for care. This data shows a significant difference in the means for discipline, creativity, and care between public schools and integrated Islamic schools, with very little difference. However, the mean values for independence are significantly different, with Integrated Islamic school students scoring higher in this trait.

Normality Test

MANOVA requires the fulfilment of two conditions: normal distribution and homogeneity. Therefore, the initial stage in this data analysis is conducting a multivariate normality test for each data set. The following is the plot of Mahalanobis distance with chi-square based on the data obtained from the students.

Figure 2

The Plot of Data Normality of The Public School (Left) and Integrated Islamic Schools (Right)



Source. Own research.

The plot shows that public school and Integrated Islamic school data points are scattered along a single linear line on the x-axis (Mahalanobis distance) and y-axis (chi-square). This suggests that the data conforms to a normal distribution. A correlation analysis was carried out between the Mahalanobis distance and chi-square to strengthen this theory, with results in Table 3.

Table 3

Correlation Between The Mahalanobis Distance and The Chi-Square

| | | Pubic School | | Integrated Islamic School | |
|----------------------|---------------------|--------------|------------|---------------------------|------------|
| | | Mahalanobis | Chi-square | Mahalanobis | Chi-square |
| Mahalanobis Distance | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .965 | 1 | .971 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | < .001 | | < .001 |
| | N | 512 | 512 | 512 | 512 |
| Chi-square | Pearson Correlation | .965 | 1 | .971 | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | < .001 | | < .001 | |
| | N | 512 | 512 | 512 | 512 |

Source. Own research.

According to Table 3, the correlation between Mahalanobis distance and Chi-square value for public school student data is 0.965, while for Integrated Islamic school student data, it is 0.971. These high correlation values confirm that the data follows a normal distribution.

Homogeneity (Variance and Covariance) Test

The results of the MANOVA technique reinforced the results obtained from the descriptive technique. An assumption test needs to be performed to conduct analyses using MANOVA. One of the assumptions underlying the use of MANOVA is that the data groups have equal variance or covariance (homogeneity). Box's M and Levene's tests can be used to test the assumption. Box's M test is intended to test the equality of covariance of the used data groups. The Box's M test results produced a statistical p-value (Sig.) of 0.160. Further, as the p-value $> \alpha$ (0.05), the variance-covariance matrix of the data groups is homogeneous. This result is reinforced by Levene's test, which assesses the equality of the variance between the data groups, as follows.

Table 4

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances

| Levene Statistic | df1 | df2 | Sig. | | |
|------------------|-----------------|--------|------|-----|------|
| Discipline | Based on Mean | .384 | 1 | 138 | .536 |
| | Based on Median | 1.363 | 1 | 138 | .245 |
| Independence | Based on Mean | .047 | 1 | 138 | .828 |
| | Based on Median | .694 | 1 | 138 | .406 |
| Creativity | Based on Mean | 2.797 | 1 | 138 | .097 |
| | Based on Median | 1.901 | 1 | 138 | .170 |
| Care | Based on Mean | 11.909 | 1 | 138 | .001 |
| | Based on Median | 3.640 | 1 | 138 | .058 |

Source. Own research.

Table 4 shows that the p-values (Sig.) are 0.53 for discipline, 0.828 for independence, 0.97 for creativity, and 0.001 for care. As the p-values are higher than the α value of 0.05, it can be concluded that the assumptions are met so that MANOVA can be performed.

Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) Test

After seeing the results of the assumption test, the next step is to see if there are any differences in the characters of discipline, independence, creativity, and care between students of the public schools and the Integrated Islamic schools. This research hypothesises that there is a difference in the characters of discipline, independence, creativity, and care as viewed from the types of schools (i.e., public schools and Integrated Islamic schools). The following table was obtained based on the results of the MANOVA test.

Table 5*The Result of Multivariate Analysis of Variance Test*

| | Effect | Value | F | Hypothesis df | Error df | Sig. |
|--------|--------------------|-------|--------------------|---------------|----------|------|
| School | Pillai's Trace | .085 | 3.140 ^b | 4.000 | 135.000 | .017 |
| | Wilks' Lambda | .915 | 3.140 ^b | 4.000 | 135.000 | .017 |
| | Hotelling's Trace | .093 | 3.140 ^b | 4.000 | 135.000 | .017 |
| | Roy's Largest Root | .093 | 3.140 ^b | 4.000 | 135.000 | .017 |

Source. Own research.

According to Table 5, the F value is 3.140, and the p-value (Sig.) is 0.017. Since the significance value of the calculation was compared with the α value 0.05, which is the significance level, we can see that the $p\text{-value} < \alpha$. The F value was obtained using Pillai's Trace. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a significant difference in the attributes of discipline, independence, creativity, and care between public schools and Integrated Islamic schools.

A MANOVA test follow-up was carried out to determine and confirm if there were any partial differences in the values of each character, including discipline, independence, creativity, and care, between public junior high schools and private integrated Islamic junior high schools. The following are the results.

Table 6*Test of Between-Subject Effects*

| Source | Dependent Variable | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|--------|--------------------|-------------------------|----|-------------|-------|------|
| School | Discipline | .350 | 1 | .350 | .836 | .362 |
| | Independence | 6.429 | 1 | 6.429 | 7.813 | .006 |
| | Creativity | .257 | 1 | .257 | .257 | .613 |
| | Care | 1.607 | 1 | 1.607 | 3.640 | .058 |

Source. Own research.

The F value in Table 6 represents the result of a significance test for differences between groups in a dependent variable. The larger the F value, the greater the likelihood of a significant difference between groups. The Sig. (Significance) value represents the p-value, which indicates the probability of the observed difference. If the Sig. value is less than 0.05, the difference is considered statistically significant, meaning that the independent variable (*School*) significantly affects the dependent variable.

Table 6 shows that the p-value (Sig.) for discipline, creativity, and care characters are more significant than 0.05, or $p\text{-value} > \alpha$. Therefore, it can be stated that there is no difference in the characters of discipline ($F = 0.836$, Sig. = 0.362), creativity ($F = 0.257$, Sig. = 0.613), and care ($F = 3.640$, Sig. = 0.058) between students of the public

schools and Integrated Islamic schools. However, the p-value (Sig.) of independence is smaller than 0.05, or $p\text{-value} < \alpha$. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a difference in the character of independence ($F = 7.813$, $\text{Sig.} = 0.006$) between public schools and Integrated Islamic schools. Further analysis was conducted in the qualitative phase to delve deeper into the meaning of these differences.

Qualitative Phase

After conducting the quantitative data analysis, the researcher moved on to the qualitative phase of the study. In this phase, qualitative data was collected based on the interpreted quantitative data. The most interesting aspect of the quantitative data was that students in Integrated Islamic schools exhibited better independence than those in public schools. Thus, in the qualitative phase, interviews and documentation studies were conducted with two vice principals of student affairs from public and Integrated Islamic schools. The interview questions aimed to obtain information on implementing character education in schools, programmes supporting character education, and student independence formation. The following is a description of the interview results.

Implementation of Character Education

Many schools have implemented character education as part of a national programme to develop exceptional students with strong character. When a researcher inquired about the duration of the character education programme in schools, it was revealed that each school had implemented it for a considerable time. WN, the Vice Principal of a public middle school, stated that:

Character education has been implemented in this school for a long time. It is just that it was not called character education back then. For example, students were not allowed to be late for school, had to wear neat uniforms, and their nails and hair could not be extended. These were all indirectly part of character education. However, since implementing the Curriculum 2013, character education has become mandatory for all schools. The challenge now is that some teachers still believe that implementing character education is only the responsibility of religious and civic education teachers when, in fact, all teachers should be involved. We are still working on this to ensure that teachers can integrate character education into the learning process.

According to the information, character education was already implemented at the public school before the Curriculum-2013 was introduced. However, the teachers were unfamiliar with the term “character education”. During the implementation process, some challenges were identified that still need to be addressed, including

the perception among some teachers that character education is solely the responsibility of religious and civic education teachers. Therefore, it is necessary to make further efforts to educate all teachers at public schools about the importance of implementing character education in the learning process. Next, the vice principal of the Integrated Islamic school, RA, was asked the same question, and here is his explanation:

Character education has been one of the fundamental aspects of this school since its establishment. The school's unique curriculum, called Integrated Islamic School Networking (IISN) curriculum, focuses on character development and seamlessly integrates with the Ministry of Education and Culture's curriculum. To ensure the implementation of the character-based curriculum, all teachers must integrate Islamic values into every subject, including verses from the Quran. Teachers undergo a rigorous selection process based on their academic expertise and religious commitment, including their prayer habits, Quran memorisation, a smoke-free lifestyle, and refraining from romantic relationships for unmarried teachers.

The information above indicates that the Integrated Islamic School has been implementing character education since its establishment. The school has a unique character-based curriculum called Integrated Islamic School Networking (IISN). Interestingly, all teachers at this school are trained to integrate Islamic character values into the teaching process for every subject. The school selects teachers based on their pedagogical and affective abilities, reflecting their religious character, such as consistently performing the five daily prayers, memorising the Quran, and being committed to refraining from smoking and dating.

Supporting Programmes for Character Education

Schools need to provide programmes that support character education to promote good character among students. To better understand these programmes, the researcher interviewed the vice principal of the public school WN. Below are the results of this interview.

The school's top priority in shaping a student's character is cultivating discipline. Therefore, student discipline is of the utmost importance in the teaching and learning process. However, this does not mean that other character values are ignored. Other values are still instilled, but discipline is given more emphasis. This character value is further reinforced through various extracurricular activities such as Scouts, Drum Band, Islamic Student Association (Rohis), and sports.

The response given by WN indicates that public schools implement character education programmes through academic and extracurricular activities, such as scouts, drum bands, religious studies (Rohis), and sports. Although the school strongly emphasises discipline, it also strives to instill other positive character values in its students.

The same question was posed to the vice principal of an Integrated Islamic school, who responded with their perspective on the matter.

Character education is integral to this middle school's curriculum, encompassing every aspect of education, from the school culture to its programmes. The school has designed its programmes with a focus on character development. A few specific programmes supporting character education are scout and extracurricular activities, which are usually held on Saturdays. The school offers various extracurricular activities, such as cooking, science club, sports, public speaking, Arabic and English languages, journalism, and computers. However, the school emphasises the compulsory character development programme and the weekly mentoring activity.

RA's response explains that the Integrated Islamic school focuses on developing student character education. Like public schools, they promote character values through scout activities and extracurricular activities such as cooking, science club, sports, public speaking, Arabic and English languages, journalism, and computers. However, what sets them apart is their emphasis on character education through the compulsory mentoring programme. The mentoring programme is a guidance and support programme designed to help students achieve specific goals. Mentors are expected to provide academic and non-academic support and guidance to their mentees in small groups of 6–10 students, led by a teacher. The goal of this mentoring programme is to instill character values intensively through deeper interactions between mentors and their mentees (Martins et al., 2024).

Building Students' Independence Character

Quantitative data analysis showed a difference in independence character scores between public and Integrated Islamic school students. Interviews were conducted to understand how independent character is formed in schools. Below is the result of an interview with the vice principal of public school, WN:

At this school, we cultivate independent character in our students through both the learning process and extracurricular activities. Our teaching approach is student-centered, with teachers as facilitators and guides to keep students on track. This teaching method encourages students to become more independent in learning, assignments, and other activities. We also give students the freedom to create their extracurricular activities, which helps them develop self-reliance and independence. To achieve this, we encourage our students to discuss their goals and objectives for these activities, which in turn helps them learn how to work independently, individually, and as a group.

WN's explanation reveals that public schools help students develop independent character through classroom learning and extracurricular activities such as scouts,

marching band, religious groups (rohis), and sports. Implementing student-centered learning is one of the ways to promote independent character formation during the teaching and learning process. In addition, an intriguing aspect of extracurricular activities at this school is that students are free to design their activities and set their own goals. This fosters independence among students as they learn to take responsibility and make decisions for themselves.

AR, the vice principal of an integrated Islamic school, was asked the same question during an interview. The response is:

Character independence is developed in the students through mandatory programmes such as Scouts, mentoring, and a night of faith and piety, as well as extracurricular programmes on Saturdays. There is also an annual programme called the Student Creativity Event (SCE). All of these programmes are student-led, and the teachers act only as coordinators to guide them. In brief, the students take the lead in all school programmes and activities.

The previous explanation reveals that the formation of independent character in Integrated Islamic schools is accomplished through mandatory school programmes such as scouts, mentoring, the night of faith and piety, the teaching and learning process, and extracurricular activities held every week. Additionally, annual programmes such as the Student Creativity Event (SCE) are part of building students' independent character. If we observe closely, the students carry out almost every programme or activity at this school. Usually, students in the last grades become committee members for programme activities, and teachers only act as coordinators to ensure the smooth running of a programme. Through these activities, students have been instilled with independent character in designing and solving problems in carrying out activities.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to identify any differences in the characters of discipline, independence, creativity, and care between students in the public middle schools and Integrated Islamic middle schools in Labuhanbatu Regency. The results of the descriptive analysis indicate a significant difference in the mean values of discipline, independence, creativity, and care, although it is minimal. This means that students of both public schools and Integrated Islamic schools have different qualities in the said characters. This is also reinforced by the results of the MANOVA test, which indicate significant differences in discipline, independence, creativity, and caring between students of both types of schools.

However, the MANOVA analysis of this study has several findings and limitations. The initial MANOVA test results indicated a significant overall difference across all variables ($p = 0.017$) between public schools and Integrated Islamic schools. However, after conducting follow-up tests, only the character of independence showed

a significant difference ($p = 0.006$) between public schools and Integrated Islamic schools. This provides information that multivariate analysis results showing significant differences do not guarantee that univariate analysis results will show the same outcome.

After conducting interviews, it was found that character education has been practiced for a long time in public schools and Integrated Islamic schools. Since their inception, integrated Islamic schools have implemented character education in various aspects, such as teacher recruitment, teaching and learning processes, and other school programmes. The recruitment of teachers and staff in Integrated Islamic Schools follows Islamic standards, such as the obligation to perform the five daily prayers, abstaining from dating for those who are unmarried, prohibiting smoking for male staff, and adhering to proper Islamic dress codes. Teachers and staff in Integrated Islamic Schools also hold weekly performance meetings to discuss challenges in programme implementation and students' moral and academic issues. Through these regular meetings, teachers share ideas to find practical solutions that can be applied. In addition to routine meetings, teachers and staff receive weekly spiritual guidance to maintain their enthusiasm for teaching (Wasehudin et al., 2024). These engaging programmes are not found in public schools. Teacher recruitment in public schools is based solely on academic scores obtained from government-administered tests. Teacher training and performance meetings in public schools mainly focus on academic improvement, resulting in less attention being given to students' character development and personal challenges.

Both public and Integrated Islamic schools have similar policies of strengthening character education for students through teaching and learning activities and extracurricular activities. However, public schools prioritise discipline as their flagship character. On the other hand, integrated Islamic schools instill a balanced combination of discipline, independence, creativity, and other character values (Fiala, 2024). They expect students to have a balanced character to become a good and virtuous person.

The mean values of independence indicate a significant difference between students of Integrated Islamic schools and public school students, with the former showing superiority. Independence, in this regard, is the ability to regulate and manage oneself without relying too much on the help or supervision of others (Fahroji, 2020). Several factors that can affect independence are family education, parental support, school environment, educational experience, time management skills, and social relationships (Devi et al., 2019; Maduretno & Andrini, 2018). The values and education students receive at home can provide a foundation for developing independence. Parents who provide positive emotional support can help students develop confidence and motivation to be independent.

The school environment plays a significant role in shaping students' character. A school's culture is one factor that influences students' behaviour, encouraging independence, creativity, and initiative. During an interview, it was revealed that students are always involved in school activities. The school creates programmes that empower students to participate actively in learning and decision-making. Such programmes

include student organisations, Scouts, art performances, extracurricular activities, and more (Nasution et al., 2023; Rezekiah et al., 2022). These experiences outside the formal curriculum provide opportunities for students to develop skills and independence. By involving students in every activity and school programme, they will have goals and ambitions to motivate them to work independently and overcome obstacles (Packham & Taplin, 2024). Good self-awareness, including understanding strengths and weaknesses, helps students plan to achieve their goals. Additionally, students will learn to communicate well with other students to get support from the team, which helps them develop independence. This is supported by research results showing that students construct knowledge through the learning environment around them (Hermanto et al., 2024).

However, this study has found that more character education programmes are available for students at Integrated Islamic schools than for public schools. Programmes such as mentoring activities, the Night of Faith and Piety, and the Student Creativity Event (SCE) are exclusively available at Integrated Islamic schools. Therefore, students at these schools tend to develop more independence than their counterparts at public schools.

Based on the documentation study, this research also found that parents of students at Integrated Islamic schools tend to have higher educational backgrounds (Bachelor's and Master's degrees) and are therefore more aware of the importance of supporting their children's cognitive and affective education. This is in contrast to parents of students at public schools, who typically have only elementary to high school educational backgrounds. Research also shows that parents with better educational backgrounds have a greater awareness to encourage their children to learn, be responsible, and take initiative, which ultimately supports the development of independence (Alifiah & Roesminingsih, 2018; Amazona & Helga, 2016; Laksana, 2015).

Integrated Islamic schools' religious syllabus and curriculum are also a significant factor in attracting parents to enroll their children there (Eck, 2024). The Integrated Islamic curriculum provides better character education than the Ministry of Education and Culture curriculum. This is backed up by research stating that parents often choose private schools with a religious syllabus. This is because the students' school time is more efficiently used, as they can attend religious school in one session. While these factors are only minor parental considerations, they still influence their choices (Yaacob et al., 2015).

There are several limitations in this study. The first limitation is the MANOVA statistical analysis. The limitation of this analysis is evident in the p-value for the character of care ($p = 0.058$), which approaches the significance threshold ($\alpha = 0.05$). Despite the slight difference between these values, the researchers firmly stated that $p\text{-value} = 0.058 > \alpha = 0.05$. This small margin is influenced by the sample size used. Therefore, for other researchers who wish to continue this study, it is strongly recommended that the sample size be increased.

This study also provides interesting implications for public schools. Referring to the success of the systems and programmes implemented by Integrated Islamic Schools, the author suggests that public schools consider adopting relevant programmes or systems from Integrated Islamic Schools for implementation in their institutions. This step serves as an effort for public schools to improve the quality of character education implementation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the explanation provided above, students of Integrated Islamic schools have higher levels of independence than public schools. The difference in independent character occurs because the programmes supporting character education in integrated Islamic schools are more varied, while public schools prioritise discipline as the leading character. The implementation of character education in public schools prioritises discipline, making students excel in this trait, even though the results of this study show only a very small difference. Therefore, the common belief that character education in Integrated Islamic schools is better than in public schools only applies to students' independence, not all character traits. Parents who want their children to be more independent should attend an integrated Islamic school. Parents can send their children to public schools to strengthen the character of discipline. However, it is important to note that this study only focuses on four character values: discipline, independence, creativity, and caring. As a result, further research is necessary to reinforce the findings of this study and explore other character values.

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