



Shaping Indonesia's 2045 Generation: Teacher Empowerment Strategies for Religious Character Building in Early Childhood

Celia Cinantya¹, Ahmad Suriansyah², Aslamiah³, Novitawati⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Doctoral Program in Educational Administration, Postgraduate Program, Universitas Lambung Mangkurat, Banjarmasin, Indonesia

E-mail: celia.cinantya@ulm.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Teacher empowerment,
Religious character,
Early childhood,
Golden Indonesia 2045

ABSTRACT

Purpose - This study aims to explore how teacher empowerment strategies are implemented in early childhood education settings, identify professional, institutional, and contextual factors influencing teachers' capacity to foster religious character, and examine how these strategies contribute to the development of religious character as a foundation for long-term national development.

Methodology - Using qualitative research methods, this study explores the experiences and perceptions of principals and teachers regarding strengthening religious-based character for early childhood. The subjects of this study were Principals, Teachers, and parents at PAUD Al Firdaus, Banjarmasin. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation studies. Data validity tests used Triangulation Techniques. Data analysis used Miles & Huberman's analysis techniques, consisting of data condensation, data presentation, drawing, and verifying conclusions.

Findings - Teacher empowerment is implemented through continuous professional development, leadership trust and autonomy, institutional support, and systematic monitoring and evaluation. Teachers' capacity to foster religious character is influenced by professional competence, supportive school culture, leadership commitment, parental involvement, and the availability of learning resources. Furthermore, empowered teachers demonstrate greater creativity, consistency, and commitment in integrating religious values into daily learning routines and habituation practices, leading to observable improvements in children's moral attitudes, religious behaviors, and social interactions.

Contribution - This study concludes that teacher empowerment is a critical foundation for sustainable religious character development in early childhood and serves as a strategic investment in building ethically grounded human capital aligned with Indonesia's Vision 2045.

Received 04 January 2026; Received in revised form 15 January 2026; Accepted 10 June 2026

Jurnal Eduscience (JES) Volume 13 No. 3 (2026)

Available online 30 June 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is widely recognized as a critical period for shaping human character, values, and foundational competencies that persist throughout life. During early childhood, neural development occurs rapidly, making this period highly sensitive to environmental stimulation, including moral and spiritual influences. Globally, early childhood education (ECE) is acknowledged not only as foundational for cognitive and social development but also as essential for moral and ethical formation, reflecting Sustainable Development Goal 4's emphasis on quality early education for all children to thrive and flourish (Ghufron, 2018; Risdianto, 2019). In many countries, including Indonesia, this developmental stage is commonly described as a "golden age," during which children absorb values, norms, and behaviors through observation and habituation. These early experiences significantly shape their future identities as citizens, community members, and leaders. Consequently, the global push for integrating character and values into early learning is supported by numerous educational frameworks that emphasize holistic education encompassing cognitive, affective, social, and ethical dimensions (Alannasir, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, the national government has emphasized early childhood education as a strategic priority to realize the vision of Golden Indonesia 2045, where high-quality human resources with strong character are expected to drive sustainable national development. This vision positions early education as a foundational investment rather than a peripheral educational stage. According to recent national data, participation rates for children aged 5 to 6 in ECE programs have reached approximately 74.15 %, while nearly 74.67 % of institutions report implementing holistic services aligned with national standards, indicating substantial progress in access expansion (Elliott et al., 2020; Saptatiningsih & Permana, 2019). These achievements demonstrate the government's commitment to improving early childhood services nationwide. However, significant gaps remain, with around 2.8 million children still lacking access to ECE services, highlighting persistent disparities across regions (McWilliam et al., 2020). These realities underscore the urgency of strategic interventions that not only expand participation but also enhance teacher quality and the character-building capacity of early learning environments.

Religious character represents a central element of moral formation in many societies and is particularly significant in Indonesia, where religious values are deeply intertwined with cultural traditions and national identity. From early childhood, religious teachings often serve as moral compasses, guiding children's understanding of right and wrong. Research on religious education in Indonesian early childhood settings indicates that the majority of ECE institutions actively implement religious education policies as part of daily learning routines (Karyono et al., 2023; Nurcahya et al., 2025; Prasetyo, 2023). These practices contribute to children's understanding of divine concepts, moral conduct, respect, and politeness. Moreover, religious activities in early education help internalize values such as honesty, responsibility, and social harmony. These findings illustrate that religious content serves not merely as doctrinal instruction but also as a powerful vehicle for character education, shaping children's worldviews and social interactions (Elliott et al., 2020).

Although previous studies have extensively discussed religious character education in early childhood settings, most existing research focuses primarily on instructional methods, children's moral outcomes, or the implementation of religious routines in classrooms. Limited attention has been given to how teacher empowerment strategies systematically shape teachers' capacities to become effective agents of religious character formation in early childhood education. Furthermore, prior studies often examine teacher competence and character education as separate domains, without adequately exploring the interconnected relationships among professional empowerment, institutional support, and the long-term vision for national character development. In the Indonesian context, research specifically linking teacher empowerment in religious character education with the broader agenda of Indonesia's Vision 2045 remains scarce. This gap is significant because achieving the Vision 2045 agenda requires not only academically competent future generations but also morally grounded and spiritually resilient citizens formed from early childhood. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how teacher empowerment strategies are implemented, what factors influence teachers' capacities, and how these strategies contribute to religious character building as a foundational element for shaping Indonesia's future generation.

Teachers play a critical, irreplaceable role in instilling religious and ethical values in young learners. In early childhood settings, children learn primarily through imitation, making teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and language highly influential (Mustadi & Amelia, 2023). Qualitative studies in Indonesian ECE contexts reveal that teacher-led habituation practices—such as morning prayers, polite communication practices, and modeling respectful behavior—strongly support children's moral and religious development (Ghufron, 2018; Khodijah, 2018; Suriansyah, 2023). These routine activities help transform abstract values into concrete daily experiences for children. Beyond instructional delivery, teachers function as moral exemplars who embody the values they seek to instill. Thus, the teacher's role encompasses exemplifying character, facilitating meaningful interactions, and nurturing children's spiritual awareness, all of which are pivotal in forming integrated and value-driven identities from an early age (Güler Yıldız et al., 2021a).

However, fostering religious character in early childhood in an increasingly diverse and globalized world requires teachers to adopt innovative, contextually relevant pedagogical approaches. Traditional instructional methods alone are often insufficient to engage young learners meaningfully. Research highlights that strategies such as storytelling, structured play, role-playing, and value-based activities effectively promote prosocial behavior and spiritual awareness among children (Attruk et al., 2024; Mulenga & Shilongo, 2024). These approaches allow children to experience values in action rather than through abstract explanation. Furthermore, such methods align with children's natural learning tendencies, which prioritize play, imagination, and social interaction (Güler Yıldız et al., 2021b). As a result, these instructional strategies are consistent with global best practices that emphasize child-centered, play-based, and culturally responsive pedagogy in early childhood education.

Despite advances in curriculum design and pedagogical strategies, a persistent challenge lies in the uneven competencies and preparedness of early childhood teachers to lead character-rich learning experiences. National surveys and educational research indicate that many ECE teachers have limited access to structured professional development opportunities, particularly those focused on character and religious education (Farantika et al., 2023; Hasanah & Deiniatur, 2018). This limitation affects teachers' confidence and effectiveness in integrating values into daily learning. In some cases, character education is treated as an additional task rather than an integral pedagogical responsibility. Such conditions hinder the consistent implementation of religious character education across institutions. Therefore, these challenges highlight the pressing need for comprehensive teacher empowerment programs that strengthen both pedagogical skills and spiritual leadership capacities.

Teacher empowerment strategies must be multifaceted and sustainable to support religious character building in early childhood education effectively. Such strategies include continuous professional development, mentoring systems, reflective practice, and opportunities for professional collaboration. Research indicates that intentional teacher preparation and ongoing mentorship not only enhance instructional quality but also increase teachers' self-efficacy and commitment to character education (Yulianti, 2021). Empowered teachers are more likely to innovate, reflect on their practices, and adapt learning activities to children's needs. Moreover, empowerment initiatives that involve communities and parents further reinforce the consistency of character education across learning environments. Empirical studies increasingly advocate for empowerment models embedded in national education policies while remaining responsive to local contexts (Cinantya et al., 2024; Heller, 1993; Yuda et al., 2023).

Local case studies from various regions of Indonesia further illustrate how religious character education can be contextually integrated within early childhood programs. For example, research conducted at PAUD Nurul Huda in Bantarsari shows that habituation to religious practices, such as Dhuha prayer, significantly influences children's gratitude, discipline, and religious orientation (Sallis, 2014). These practices are most effective when facilitated by teachers who understand local cultural values and community expectations. The study highlights how daily religious routines become meaningful character-building experiences rather than formal rituals (Bass, B. M., & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, 2020). Such local evidence shows the importance of contextualized teacher strategies in shaping children's moral development. These insights provide practical examples of how teacher practices and community norms converge to support holistic child development.

Ultimately, shaping Indonesia's 2045 generation demands a sustained and strategic focus on empowering early childhood educators as key agents of character formation. Teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge but architects of values that will define the nation's future human capital. By leveraging data-driven, context-sensitive, and spiritually grounded teacher empowerment strategies, Indonesia can foster a generation that balances academic excellence with moral integrity. This approach aligns with national development goals and global agendas for sustainable and inclusive education. Strengthening teacher empowerment in early childhood education is therefore both an educational and a moral imperative. Through this commitment, Indonesia can nurture a generation prepared to lead with ethical awareness, spiritual depth, and social responsibility in 2045 and beyond. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How are teacher empowerment strategies implemented in early childhood education settings to support religious character building among young children in Indonesia?
- 2) What professional, institutional, and contextual factors influence teachers' capacity to foster religious character in early childhood education?
- 3) How do teacher empowerment strategies contribute to the development of religious character in early childhood as a foundation for Indonesia's Vision 2045?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive, qualitative research design to understand social phenomena in their natural settings without manipulating variables. More specifically, this study adopts a qualitative case study approach because it focuses intensively on a single educational institution, namely PAUD IT Al Firdaus, Banjarmasin, as a bounded system for exploring teacher empowerment strategies in religious character education. Qualitative descriptive research is appropriate for exploring complex educational processes, particularly those related to values, beliefs, and empowerment practices that are difficult to quantify. The study seeks to describe teacher empowerment strategies in strengthening religious character in early childhood education as they occur in real-life contexts. Data are collected naturally through observation, interviews, and document analysis to capture participants' authentic experiences and perspectives. This approach enables the researcher to gain a holistic, contextually grounded understanding of teacher empowerment within the institutional culture of early childhood education. As emphasized by Sugiyono, descriptive qualitative research prioritizes depth of meaning and contextual interpretation rather than statistical generalization (Sugiyono, 2016).

The qualitative approach is also descriptive, as the data generated consist of words, actions, interactions, and written documents rather than numerical data. The findings are presented in rich narrative descriptions that reflect actual conditions, social interactions, and educational practices in the field. This design enables the researcher to examine how empowerment strategies are conceptualized, implemented, and experienced by educational stakeholders. Furthermore, the descriptive qualitative design supports the exploration of perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences related to religious character building. According to Moleong, this approach is particularly suitable for educational research seeking to understand meaning and social processes (Moleong, 2019). The study was conducted from January to March 2026, allowing the researcher to observe educational activities, religious practices, and teacher interactions over a sustained period. Therefore, this design aligns well with the study's aim of shaping an in-depth understanding of teacher empowerment in early childhood education.

Key Informants

The key informants in this study were the principal, teachers, and parents at PAUD IT Al Firdaus in Banjarmasin, who were directly involved in early childhood education practices. A total of 10 participants were purposively selected, consisting of 1 principal, 6 teachers, and 3 parents. The teachers ranged in age from 24 to 42 years old and had 3 to 15 years of teaching experience in early childhood education. Parent participants were selected based on their active involvement in school programs and regular communication with teachers

regarding children's character development. The principal was selected as a key informant due to their strategic role in policy implementation, institutional leadership, and teacher empowerment initiatives. Teachers were chosen because they are the primary agents in implementing religious character education in daily learning activities. Parents were included to provide complementary perspectives on the impact of teacher empowerment and religious character development observed at home. The selection of informants was conducted purposively to ensure relevance and depth of information. This approach enabled the researcher to capture diverse yet interconnected viewpoints regarding teacher empowerment and character education.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of teacher empowerment and religious character building. The interview process consisted of 10 sessions conducted over approximately 8 weeks, each lasting 45-90 minutes.

- a) Semi-structured interview guides were used to allow flexibility while maintaining focus on the research objectives. Interviews with the Principal focused on leadership strategies, empowerment policies, and institutional support mechanisms. Teacher interviews explored pedagogical practices, professional development experiences, and challenges in implementing religious character education. Parent interviews provided insights into perceived changes in children's behavior and character development. Examples of interview questions included: *"How does the school empower teachers in implementing religious character education?"* and *"What challenges do teachers face in integrating religious values into classroom activities?"* This method allowed for the collection of rich, detailed, and reflective data.
- b) Observation was used as a complementary data-collection technique to capture real-time educational practices and interactions in the school environment. The researcher conducted non-participant observations during learning activities, religious routines, and teacher-child interactions. A total of 12 observation sessions were conducted, with each session lasting approximately 60-120 minutes. The observation focused on teacher empowerment practices, classroom religious routines, teacher-student interactions, and the implementation of value-based learning activities. This method enabled the researcher to identify how empowerment strategies were enacted in practice rather than merely reported. Observational data also helped verify consistency between interview responses and actual classroom behavior. An observation checklist and field-note template were used to systematically record behavioral patterns, classroom situations, and teacher practices related to religious character education. Field notes were systematically recorded to document patterns, behaviors, and contextual details. Observation thus strengthened the credibility and depth of the data collected.
- c) Documentation studies were conducted to support and enrich findings from interviews and observations. Relevant documents included school vision and mission statements, curriculum plans, lesson plans, teacher development records, and school policies related to character education. These documents provided formal evidence of teacher empowerment strategies and institutional commitments to religious character building. Document analysis allowed the researcher to trace alignment between policy intentions and practical implementation. Furthermore, documents served as historical records that contextualized current practices. The researcher also analyzed photographs of learning activities, teacher training materials, and weekly evaluation reports to strengthen data triangulation and contextual interpretation. This triangulated approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon (Silverman, 2016).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection to allow continuous reflection and refinement of emerging findings. The study employed the interactive data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which emphasizes iterative and cyclical analysis. The first step involved data

condensation, where raw data from interviews, observations, and documents were selected, coded, and categorized. Open coding was initially conducted to identify recurring concepts, including "teacher autonomy," "religious habituation," "leadership support," and "professional development." These codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories, including empowerment practices, institutional support, pedagogical innovation, and character-building strategies. This process helped identify key themes related to teacher empowerment and religious character education. Coding was performed inductively to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data. This step ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' actual experiences.

The second and third steps involved data display and the drawing or verification of conclusions. Data were organized into matrices, narrative descriptions, and thematic charts to facilitate interpretation. These displays enabled the researcher to identify patterns, relationships, and recurring themes across data sources. Conclusions were drawn carefully through continuous comparison and verification of evidence. The researcher revisited the data repeatedly to ensure consistency and accuracy. For example, statements from teachers regarding empowerment practices were cross-checked with classroom observation results and institutional documents to confirm thematic consistency. This analytical process enabled the development of credible, well-substantiated findings (Miles et al., 2014).

Data Validity Testing

To ensure data validity and trustworthiness, this study employed triangulation techniques as the primary strategy. Triangulation was conducted by comparing data obtained from different sources, including principals, teachers, and parents. Triangulation was also used by integrating interviews, observations, and document analysis. This approach helped reduce bias and increase confidence in the findings (Silverman, 2016). Inconsistencies across data sources were carefully examined rather than ignored. For instance, teachers' claims regarding daily religious habituation practices were verified through classroom observations and supporting lesson-plan documentation. As a result, triangulation strengthened the credibility and reliability of the research outcomes. In addition to triangulation, prolonged engagement and persistent observation were used to enhance data validity. The researcher spent sufficient time in the research setting to understand the school culture and build trust with participants. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected informants to confirm accuracy and interpretation. Participants were invited to review interview summaries and clarify any statements they considered unclear or incomplete. Feedback from participants was used to refine and validate conclusions. This process ensured that findings genuinely reflected participants' perspectives. Overall, these validity strategies enhanced the rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative research.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study concern teacher empowerment strategies and their role in fostering religious character in early childhood education. It is designed to capture how empowerment is implemented in practice, what factors influence teachers' capacity, and how these strategies contribute to long-term character development aligned with Indonesia's Vision 2045. By organizing the findings into research focus, analytical dimensions, and empirical indicators, the table provides a structured overview that bridges empirical evidence and theoretical interpretation. This framework also facilitates a clearer understanding of the interconnected roles of teachers, school leadership, institutional support, and contextual influences in shaping character education outcomes. As such, the table serves as a concise representation of the study's qualitative findings and supports deeper discussion in subsequent sections.

Table 1. Analytical Framework of Teacher Empowerment and Religious Character

Research Focus	Main Emphasis	Key Dimensions of Analysis	Indicators / Empirical Evidence
Implementation of teacher empowerment strategies in early childhood education	Practical enactment of empowerment strategies	Professional development, teacher autonomy, institutional support, monitoring, and evaluation	Teacher training and workshops, mentoring and daily guidance, teacher involvement in planning and evaluation, availability of facilities, religious habituation activities
Factors influencing teachers' capacity to foster religious character	Determinants shaping teacher effectiveness	Professional competence, leadership support, school culture, parental involvement, contextual environment	Teachers' educational background, leadership motivation and trust, religious school climate, collaboration with parents, adequacy of learning resources
Contribution of teacher empowerment strategies to religious character development and Indonesia's Vision 2045	Long-term impact and sustainability	Character internalization, consistency of practices, and future-oriented human capital development	Children's daily religious behaviors, moral attitudes and values, continuity of character programs, reflective teaching practices, alignment with national development goals

The table illustrates that teacher empowerment in early childhood education is a multidimensional process encompassing professional development, institutional trust, leadership support, and continuous monitoring. Empowerment strategies are not limited to formal training but are reinforced through daily mentoring, autonomy in instructional decision-making, and active teacher involvement in program planning and evaluation. These elements collectively create a supportive professional environment that enables teachers to internalize and consistently implement religious character education. The availability of adequate facilities and resources further strengthens the effectiveness of these strategies by allowing teachers to design meaningful, child-centered, and value-based learning experiences.

Furthermore, the table highlights that the development of religious character in early childhood is influenced by both internal and external factors surrounding the teacher. Professional competence, school culture, and parental collaboration emerge as critical determinants of successful character formation. When empowerment strategies are sustained and aligned with broader institutional and national goals, they contribute to the internalization of moral and religious values in children's daily behaviors. In this way, teacher empowerment functions not only as an immediate pedagogical intervention but also as a strategic foundation for developing ethically grounded human capital, supporting Indonesia's long-term vision of building a resilient, value-driven generation by 2045.

RQ1. How are teacher empowerment strategies implemented in early childhood education settings to support religious character building among young children in Indonesia?

The findings indicate that teacher empowerment in developing religious character at PAUD IT Al Firdaus, Banjarmasin, is implemented through continuous guidance and daily professional support. The principal plays a central role in providing both formal direction and informal mentoring to teachers in integrating religious values into classroom practices. Empowerment is not limited to scheduled meetings; it occurs through daily interactions, reflective discussions, and classroom support. This approach helps teachers

translate abstract religious values into concrete learning experiences for young children. As the principal stated,

“Teacher empowerment is carried out every day, not only through formal meetings but also through continuous guidance and personal mentoring” (KS-01).

This finding shows that empowerment is embedded in the school’s daily culture rather than treated as a separate program.

Another key strategy for teacher empowerment is providing opportunities for professional development through training in religious-based character education. Teachers are encouraged and facilitated to participate in seminars, workshops, and religious education training that enhance their pedagogical and spiritual competencies. These training activities strengthen teachers' understanding of age-appropriate religious instruction and character development strategies. One teacher explained,

“After attending training on religious character education, I became more confident in applying values through play and storytelling” (G-02).

Such opportunities contribute to teachers’ professional growth and reinforce their role as moral educators. This indicates that structured training is a critical component of empowerment.

Teacher empowerment is also reflected in the motivation and autonomy given to teachers to innovate in line with children's needs and developmental characteristics. Teachers are encouraged to design creative, engaging learning activities that integrate religious values through storytelling, songs, role-playing, and thematic play. This autonomy allows teachers to adapt learning methods to classroom contexts without rigid instructional constraints. A teacher noted,

“We are trusted to develop creative methods as long as the religious values remain strong and suitable for children” (G-03).

This freedom fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among teachers. As a result, religious character education becomes more engaging and meaningful for young learners.

The school also empowers teachers by actively involving them in school planning, program implementation, and evaluation. Teachers participate in curriculum planning meetings, program evaluations, and decision-making related to religious character education. This involvement enhances teachers' sense of trust and professional recognition. One teacher stated,

“We are involved from planning to evaluation, so we feel responsible for the success of the program” (G-01).

Such participation strengthens teachers' commitment to school programs. This finding demonstrates that empowerment is institutionalized through shared leadership practices. Support for facilities and infrastructure further strengthens teachers' ability to implement religious character education. The school provides adequate learning resources, prayer facilities, religious storybooks, and instructional media to support character-based activities. These resources enable teachers to implement programs effectively and creatively. Teachers acknowledged that institutional support makes religious learning more practical and sustainable. As expressed by one teacher,

“Facilities such as prayer spaces and learning media really help us implement religious routines with children” (G-04).

This shows that empowerment also includes material and infrastructural support.

Monitoring and evaluation are conducted as part of continuous empowerment and improvement efforts. The principal regularly observes classroom practices and provides constructive feedback to teachers. Follow-up actions include personal mentoring, appreciation for effective practices, and additional training when needed. A teacher shared,

“After observations, we receive feedback that helps us improve without feeling judged” (G-05).

This supportive evaluation approach strengthens teachers’ confidence and professional growth. Thus, empowerment is sustained through ongoing monitoring and responsive follow-up mechanisms.

RQ2. What professional, institutional, and contextual factors influence teachers' capacity to foster religious character in early childhood education?

The findings reveal that professional competence is a major factor influencing teachers' capacity to foster religious character in early childhood education. Teachers who possess adequate pedagogical knowledge and understanding of child development are more confident in integrating religious values into daily learning activities. Professional training and workshops related to religious-based character education significantly enhance teachers' instructional skills. One teacher explained,

"Training helps me understand how to introduce religious values in ways that are suitable for young children" (G-06).

Teachers with stronger professional preparation are better able to design meaningful, age-appropriate character-learning experiences. This indicates that professional development is a foundational factor in supporting effective religious character education.

Another professional factor influencing teachers' capacity is personal religious awareness and moral commitment. Teachers who demonstrate strong personal values tend to model religious behavior consistently in classroom interactions. Such internalized values strengthen authenticity in teaching, increase children's trust, and increase their tendency to imitate. A teacher stated,

"Children follow what we do, so we must practice the values before teaching them" (G-02).

This finding highlights that professional capacity is not limited to technical competence but also includes personal integrity. Teachers' moral consistency, therefore, plays a crucial role in shaping children's religious character. Institutional support emerges as a significant factor affecting teachers' ability to implement religious character education. Support from school leadership, particularly through guidance, supervision, and encouragement, strengthens teachers' motivation and confidence. Teachers reported that regular mentoring and feedback from the principal helped them refine their approaches. One teacher noted,

"The principal always gives direction and supports our ideas, so we feel confident to implement religious programs" (G-04).

Institutional policies that prioritize character education further reinforce teachers' efforts. This demonstrates that leadership and policy alignment are essential institutional enablers.

The availability of facilities and learning resources also influences teachers' capacity to foster religious character. Adequate infrastructure, such as prayer spaces, religious learning materials, and instructional media, supports the consistent implementation of character-based activities. Teachers emphasized that well-equipped environments make it easier to implement religious routines and are more engaging for children. A teacher shared,

"Having proper facilities makes religious activities more meaningful and organized" (G-05).

Without sufficient resources, teachers face constraints in translating values into practice. Therefore, infrastructural support is a critical institutional factor. Contextual factors, including parental involvement and community culture, significantly influence teachers' capacity to foster religious character. Teachers reported that consistent reinforcement of religious values at home strengthens the effectiveness of school-based character education. Parental collaboration enhances continuity between school and family environments. One parent commented,

"We continue the habits from school at home, so children become more consistent" (OT-02).

In contrast, limited parental engagement poses challenges for teachers. These findings indicate that broader social and cultural contexts shape religious character education.

RQ3. How do teacher empowerment strategies contribute to the development of religious character in early childhood as a foundation for Indonesia's Vision 2045?

The findings indicate that teacher empowerment strategies significantly contribute to the development of religious character in early childhood by strengthening teachers' roles as moral and spiritual role models. Empowered teachers demonstrate greater confidence and consistency in practicing religious values during

daily interactions with children. Through continuous guidance, professional development, and institutional trust, teachers internalize the importance of modeling religious behavior. One teacher stated,

"When we feel supported and trusted, we become more aware that our behavior is a daily example for children" (G-07).

This heightened awareness encourages teachers to consistently demonstrate values such as honesty, discipline, and respect. Consequently, children naturally begin to imitate and internalize these behaviors. Teacher empowerment also contributes to the development of religious character by creating meaningful and engaging learning experiences. Empowered teachers are given autonomy to design learning activities that integrate religious values with play-based and child-centered approaches. These activities include religious storytelling, value-based games, and daily worship routines adapted to children's developmental levels. A teacher explained,

"We are free to create learning activities that are fun, but still contain strong religious values" (G-03).

This flexibility allows teachers to make religious education relevant and enjoyable for young learners. As a result, children develop positive emotional connections with religious practices.

Another important contribution of teacher empowerment is the consistency of religious character education through daily habituation. Empowered teachers are committed to embedding religious values into everyday routines rather than treating them as isolated lessons. Activities such as praying before learning, practicing polite language, and showing gratitude are repeated consistently. One teacher noted,

"Because we are empowered, we feel responsible to apply religious values every day, not occasionally" (G-01).

This consistency reinforces children's internalization of values. Over time, children demonstrate improved self-regulation and moral awareness. Teacher empowerment strategies also foster collaboration between schools and families, which enhances the impact of religious character education. Empowered teachers actively communicate with parents to align religious values taught at school with practices at home. This collaboration ensures continuity and reinforces children's character development across environments. A parent shared,

"The teacher often reminds us to continue religious habits at home, and it really helps our child" (OT-04).

Such partnerships extend the influence of empowerment beyond the classroom. Therefore, religious character development becomes a shared responsibility between teachers and families.

In addition, teacher empowerment supports sustainable religious character education through continuous monitoring and reflective practice. Empowered teachers receive constructive feedback and mentoring that helps them improve instructional strategies. This reflective process enables teachers to identify strengths and areas for improvement in character education practices. One teacher stated,

"Feedback from the principal helps us reflect and improve our way of teaching values" (G-05).

Continuous improvement strengthens the quality and sustainability of religious character education. Thus, empowerment contributes to long-term character development outcomes. The findings also show that teacher empowerment strategies contribute to shaping religious character as a foundational element of Indonesia's Vision 2045. Empowered teachers feel responsible not only for academic outcomes but also for children's moral and spiritual development. This sense of responsibility aligns character education with national aspirations for high-quality human resources. As one principal emphasized,

"Strong character formed in early childhood is the foundation of Indonesia's future generation" (KS-02).

Therefore, teacher empowerment serves as a strategic mechanism that links early childhood education to long-term national goals.

DISCUSSION

RQ1. How are teacher empowerment strategies implemented in early childhood education settings to support religious character building among young children in Indonesia?

The findings confirm that teacher empowerment strategies are implemented through a comprehensive and continuous approach that integrates guidance, autonomy, and professional development. This aligns with empowerment theory, which emphasizes trust, competence development, and shared responsibility as foundations for effective teaching practice (Bahriadi et al., 2022; Mujiyat et al., 2025). Leadership support plays a decisive role in creating an empowering school climate where teachers feel valued and motivated. Consistent with Anggraeni, empowered teachers demonstrate stronger commitment and creativity in character education (Anggraeni et al., 2025; Suwandana, 2021). Therefore, empowerment is not a single intervention but a sustained leadership practice embedded in school culture.

Providing training and professional development opportunities strengthens teachers' pedagogical and spiritual capacities. These findings support Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who argue that continuous professional learning enhances instructional quality and teacher confidence. When teachers understand how to integrate religious values through developmentally appropriate methods, character education becomes more effective. Training also helps teachers respond to diverse learning needs and social contexts (Kurniadi et al., 2020). Thus, professional development is a critical pillar of empowerment in early childhood religious character education. Teacher autonomy and involvement in decision-making further enhance empowerment and instructional effectiveness (Okçu et al., 2025; Siringoringo et al., 2023; Wijaya et al., 2024). Allowing teachers to innovate fosters creativity and ownership, both of which are essential to child-centered learning. This supports constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active teacher engagement in designing meaningful learning experiences. Moreover, shared decision-making strengthens teachers' sense of responsibility and accountability. Empowerment through autonomy, therefore, contributes to sustainable character education practices (Tindowen, 2019).

RQ2. What professional, institutional, and contextual factors influence teachers' capacity to foster religious character in early childhood education?

The findings suggest that an interaction of professional, institutional, and contextual factors shapes teachers' capacity to foster religious character. Professional competence and moral commitment enable teachers to act as effective role models and facilitators of character learning. This aligns with character education theory, which emphasizes integrating knowledge, values, and behavior in teaching practice. Teachers who are professionally prepared and morally grounded demonstrate greater confidence and consistency in religious instruction. Thus, professional development should address both pedagogical and ethical dimensions. Institutional support plays a pivotal role in sustaining teachers' efforts in character education (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, 2020). Leadership practices that emphasize mentoring, shared vision, and recognition enhance teacher motivation and instructional quality. This finding supports empowerment theory, which emphasizes the role of supportive organizational structures in enhancing teacher effectiveness (Iswahyudi et al., 2024; Suriansyah et al., 2024). Adequate facilities further strengthen teachers' capacity by translating institutional commitment into tangible support. Therefore, institutional factors act as both structural and motivational enablers.

Contextual factors such as parental involvement and community culture extend the influence of religious character education beyond the classroom. Consistency between school and home environments reinforces the internalization of values among young children. This finding aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of educational contexts (Mujiyat et al., 2025; Noor et al., 2020). Teachers are more effective when families and communities support their efforts. Consequently, character education must be viewed as a shared responsibility. The study highlights that fostering religious character in early childhood education requires an integrated approach that addresses professional competence, institutional support, and contextual alignment. Isolated interventions are insufficient to sustain meaningful character development (Ahmed, 2024; Blase, J., and Blase, 2001). Teacher capacity grows when empowerment is systemic and continuous. These findings provide important implications for policy and practice in shaping Indonesia's 2045 generation through values-based early childhood education.

RQ3. How do teacher empowerment strategies contribute to the development of religious character in early childhood as a foundation for Indonesia's Vision 2045?

The findings demonstrate that teacher empowerment strategies play a critical role in fostering religious character in early childhood, which aligns with Indonesia's Vision 2045. Empowerment enhances teachers' confidence, autonomy, and commitment, enabling them to function as effective moral educators. This supports empowerment theory, which emphasizes trust and professional agency as drivers of instructional quality. Teachers who feel valued and supported are more likely to model and reinforce religious values consistently (Nor et al., 2025; Putri & Yuliana, 2024). Consequently, empowerment becomes a catalyst for meaningful character education. The integration of empowerment with child-centered pedagogy further strengthens the development of religious character. Empowered teachers design engaging learning experiences that align with children's developmental needs, supporting deeper internalization of values. This finding aligns with constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active participation and meaningful learning experiences (Huda & Teh, 2018). Religious values introduced through play and habituation become part of children's lived experiences. Therefore, empowerment enhances both pedagogical effectiveness and character outcomes (Indawati et al., 2022).

Finally, teacher empowerment contributes to the sustainability of religious character education by fostering collaboration and reflective practice. Partnerships with parents ensure continuity of values across learning environments, while ongoing feedback supports continuous improvement. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which highlights the interconnectedness of educational contexts. By empowering teachers, early childhood education becomes a strategic foundation for the development of morally grounded citizens. Thus, teacher empowerment is essential for shaping Indonesia's 2045 generation through strong religious character development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teacher empowerment strategies play a fundamental role in strengthening religious character education in early childhood as a foundation for shaping Indonesia's 2045 generation. Empowerment is effectively realized through continuous professional development, trust in leadership, institutional support, and sustained monitoring and evaluation. When teachers are provided with autonomy, adequate resources, and reflective guidance, they demonstrate greater confidence, creativity, and consistency in integrating religious values into daily learning practices. These empowered practices contribute to the internalization of moral and religious behaviors among young children, reinforcing the role of early childhood education as a strategic space for character formation and long-term human capital development aligned with Indonesia's Vision 2045. Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a single early childhood education institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts with different cultural, institutional, or religious characteristics.

Additionally, the qualitative approach relied heavily on participants' perceptions, which may be subject to subjective interpretation and social desirability bias. Future research is therefore recommended to involve multiple institutions across diverse regions, employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs, and examine the long-term impact of teacher empowerment on children's character development outcomes. Further studies could also explore comparative perspectives across different religious or cultural settings to enrich the understanding of teacher empowerment as a universal yet context-sensitive strategy for character education.

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