

Comparative Study of Islamic Learning Practices in Early Childhood Institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the early childhood level plays a crucial role in shaping children's religious character from an early age. Although both Indonesia and Malaysia strongly emphasize Islamic education in preschool institutions, differences in curriculum policies and socio-cultural contexts are likely to produce distinct learning cultures. However, comparative studies specifically examining IRE learning culture at the early childhood level in both countries remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to comparatively analyze the learning culture of Islamic Religious Education at TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah in Indonesia and Tadika Alfikh Orchard in Malaysia. This research employed a descriptive qualitative comparative approach using observation, interviews, and document analysis, with data analyzed through the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model. The findings indicate that Tadika Alfikh Orchard implements a modern and structured learning culture characterized by discipline, adab-oriented practices, and the integration of digital technology. In contrast, TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah demonstrates a more humanistic and flexible learning culture through religious habituation, teacher role modeling, and play-based learning. The study concludes that the differences in learning culture are shaped by national education policies and socio-cultural values. Malaysia emphasizes structure and standardization, while Indonesia prioritizes character formation through emotional closeness and religious habituation.

Keywords: learning culture, Islamic Religious Education, early childhood education, TK Aisyiyah, Indonesia–Malaysia.

ABSTRAK

Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) pada jenjang Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) berperan penting dalam membentuk karakter religius anak sejak dini. Meskipun Indonesia dan Malaysia sama-sama mengembangkan pendidikan Islam pada tingkat prasekolah, perbedaan kebijakan kurikulum dan konteks sosial-budaya diduga membentuk kultur belajar yang berbeda. Namun, kajian komparatif yang secara

khusus membahas kultur belajar PAI pada tingkat PAUD di kedua negara masih terbatas. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara komparatif kultur belajar PAI pada TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah di Indonesia dan Tadika Alfikh Orchard di Malaysia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-komparatif melalui observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi dengan analisis data model Miles, Huberman, dan Saldana. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Tadika Alfikh Orchard menerapkan kultur belajar yang modern dan terstruktur dengan penekanan pada disiplin, adab, serta integrasi teknologi dalam pembelajaran. Sebaliknya, TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah menampilkan kultur belajar yang lebih humanis dan fleksibel melalui pembiasaan religius, keteladanan guru, dan pendekatan bermain sambil belajar. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa perbedaan kultur belajar di kedua lembaga dipengaruhi oleh kebijakan pendidikan dan nilai budaya masing-masing negara. Malaysia lebih menonjol dalam struktur dan standarisasi pembelajaran, sedangkan Indonesia lebih kuat dalam pembentukan karakter melalui interaksi emosional dan pembiasaan nilai religius.

Kata Kunci: kultur belajar; Pendidikan Agama Islam; PAUD; TK Aisyiyah; Indonesia–Malaysia.



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INTROCDUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in early childhood is the main foundation in shaping children's religious character and behavior from an early stage of development. In preschool, the internalization of religious values is not only done through the delivery of material, but also through learning experiences that are enjoyable, consistent, and appropriate for the child's development. Early childhood education must stimulate cognitive, social-emotional, spiritual, and moral aspects holistically so that children develop according to their nature (Puspita & Harfiani, 2024). Early childhood PAI is an important basis for the formation of a Muslim personality with noble character (Riskiyah & Muzammil, 2020).

Indonesia and Malaysia are two countries that have paid great attention to Islamic education from an early age, but with different learning culture characteristics. A comparison of Indonesian and Malaysian character education policies can be analyzed through four main components, namely character education objectives, implementation strategies, educational structure, and educational management (Marzam et al., 2022). In Indonesia, institutions such as Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah Kindergarten integrate Islamic and Muhammadiyah values through habituation, role modeling, and Islamic value-based play activities. The habituation-based learning model is considered effective in building children's religious character (Yuliana & Fadlillah, 2021). Meanwhile, Malaysia has developed a more structured learning culture through the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK). The curriculum in Indonesia is developed in a decentralized manner,

giving authorities the power to adjust the content and learning activities to the local context, while the National Curriculum in Malaysia is developed centrally by experts based on children's developmental milestones, which has an impact on the formation of a more structured and systematic learning culture (Rahelly & Ayob, 2016). The child-centered learning approach used places children at the center of learning with the support of technology and digital media. Research by Setiawan & Mavianti (2025) shows that the use of digital media such as Canva can significantly improve students' ability to pronounce Hijaiyah letters in Tadika (Setiawan & Mavianti, 2025). In addition, the learning culture in Malaysian Tadika is often associated with the application of strong values of manners and discipline. (Pradita & Amalia, 2024) found that teachers in Tadika act as moral guides who not only teach religious knowledge but also internalize moral values through an intensive interpersonal approach. On the other hand, a study shows that the consistent application of the Iqro' method in Tadika can improve children's ability to read the Qur'an while strengthening their spirituality from an early age (AhmadBillah & HasrianRudiSetiawan, 2025).

Various comparative studies also show that the two countries have different approaches to implementing Islamic education. Malaysia has a more standardized and centralized Islamic education system, while Indonesia is more flexible in managing the curriculum and learning practices (Noor, 2022). The structure of Islamic education in Malaysia is more uniform due to strict supervision by government agencies and religious authorities, while Indonesia shows a diversity of learning models influenced by community organizations and localities (Haryanto, 2016). The education system in Indonesia tends to emphasize cognitive aspects such as memorization and academic achievement, while the education system in Malaysia prioritizes a balance between knowledge and skills as the basis for developing students' potential (Razaqna & Putra, 2024).

Various studies show fundamental differences in character education in Indonesia and Malaysia, in terms of curriculum, values instilled, and support systems (Fadhilah et al., 2024). Although there have been many studies related to Islamic education in each country, studies that specifically discuss preschool students' learning culture in the context of PAI in a comparative manner are still limited. Meanwhile, existing research highlights that learning culture in the classroom is shaped by the interplay of teaching approaches, learning environment, and motivational factors, which vary significantly across national educational contexts (Vromans et al., 2023). However, understanding the similarities, differences, and factors that shape learning culture is important for formulating an adaptive, contextual, and relevant PAI learning model that addresses the challenges of 21st-century education.

Therefore, this study aims to comparatively analyze the learning culture of students in Islamic Religious Education at the Tadika/Kindergarten level in Indonesia and Malaysia. This study is expected to contribute to strengthening an effective and contextual

PAI learning model that is capable of integrating Islamic values with the developmental needs of children in the modern era.

The theological imperative for this study is grounded in the Qur'anic command: "And Allah brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers knowing nothing, and He gave you hearing and sight and hearts so that perhaps you would give thanks" (QS. An-Nahl: 78). This verse affirms that the formation of spiritual and intellectual awareness begins from birth, making early childhood the most critical window for Islamic education. This is further reinforced by the prophetic hadith: "Every child is born in a state of fitrah; it is his parents who make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian" (HR. Bukhari and Muslim), which underscores the decisive role of educational environment and culture in shaping a child's religious identity from the earliest stage of life.

Building on the foregoing discussion, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the forms and characteristics of the IRE learning culture at TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah in Indonesia and Tadika Alfikh Orchard in Malaysia? (2) What factors influence the formation of students' learning culture in IRE at both institutions? (3) What are the similarities and differences in learning culture between the two institutions? Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) describe the forms and characteristics of the IRE learning culture at both institutions; (2) identify and analyze the internal and external factors that shape students' learning culture; and (3) comparatively examine the similarities and differences in order to identify best practices that may be adopted or adapted across contexts.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a comparative case study approach. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of students' learning culture in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at the early childhood level within two different national contexts, namely Indonesia and Malaysia. The comparative design aimed to identify similarities and differences in the characteristics of learning culture between TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah in Indonesia and Tadika Alfikh Orchard in Malaysia, as well as to analyze the socio-cultural and educational policy factors influencing its formation in each country. The research procedure was carried out through several systematic stages. First, research sites and participants were selected purposively, focusing on institutions that represent the implementation of Islamic Religious Education at the preschool level in both countries. Second, data were collected through participant observation of IRE learning activities, in-depth interviews with principals and teachers, and document analysis of curricula, lesson plans, and institutional regulations. Observation was conducted to identify visible aspects of learning culture, including artifacts (physical environment, classroom layout, religious symbols), espoused values (vision and mission statements, instructional policies, school rules), and underlying assumptions shaping educational practices. Interviews were

conducted to explore educators' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations regarding the development of religious learning culture. Documentation served to support and validate findings obtained from observation and interviews. Data analysis was conducted interactively and continuously throughout the data collection process. The analysis followed three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, and categorizing data according to the research themes, namely the characteristics of learning culture, contributing factors, and the similarities and differences between the two institutions. Data display was presented in a descriptive-comparative narrative form to facilitate interpretation of patterns and relationships among findings. Finally, conclusions were drawn through in-depth interpretation by comparing findings from Indonesia and Malaysia to produce a comprehensive understanding of Islamic Religious Education learning culture at the early childhood level. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, this study applied source and method triangulation by cross-checking data obtained from observations, interviews, and documents to produce valid and academically accountable findings.

RESULTS

The PAI Learning Culture at Tadika Alfikh Orchard (Malaysia)

Based on field observations conducted in March 2025, the learning culture of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) at Tadika Alfikh Orchard reflects a structured, disciplined, and adab-oriented educational environment. Learning activities begin at 8:00 AM with students lining up in front of the classroom. The children stand neatly, greet the teacher collectively, and enter the classroom only after receiving instructions. During this process, the teacher actively corrects posture and tone of greeting, emphasizing politeness and orderliness as part of daily practice. In an interview, the principal stated: "Adab is our top priority. Children may not yet read fluently, but they must know how to respect teachers and follow rules." (Interview, Principal, 2025)

This statement aligns with classroom observations showing that before academic instruction begins, teachers consistently reinforce classroom rules and proper sitting posture. Discipline is not treated merely as a technical regulation but as a collective identity embedded in daily routines. Regarding instructional media, observations indicate consistent integration of digital technology. During a Hijaiyah lesson, the teacher used a projector to display interactive Canva-based slides. Students were instructed to repeat the pronunciation collectively while pointing at the letters shown on the screen. When the teacher asked questions, most students raised their hands enthusiastically. This suggests that technology is not merely a supporting tool but an integral component of the learning culture.

An internal school guideline document (2024) confirms that daily routines include structured greetings, prayers before and after activities, cleanliness practices, and orderly lining-up procedures. These activities are systematically written into the standardized

daily schedule in accordance with the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK). Such standardization strengthens consistency and reinforces a structured learning environment. Overall, the findings indicate that the IRE learning culture at Tadika Alfikh Orchard is shaped by the interaction between national curriculum standardization, the prioritization of adab as a core value, and the systematic integration of digital technology in classroom practices.

The PAI Learning Culture at TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah (Indonesia)

In contrast to the structured model observed in Malaysia, field observations at TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah demonstrate a more humanistic and flexible learning culture. Learning activities begin with collective prayer, often led by students in rotation. The teacher provides guidance in a gentle tone, emphasizing emotional closeness and encouragement rather than strict correction. During the observation of dhuha prayer activities, students performed ablution in small groups under teacher supervision. Rather than merely correcting movements, the teacher explained the simple meaning behind each step. Interactions were dialogical and warm, reflecting a relational approach to religious education. A teacher explained in an interview: “Children learn religion not by force, but by habituation. If they see and practice it every day, it will naturally become part of them.” (Interview, IRE Teacher, 2025)

This statement corresponds with observed religious habituation practices, such as memorizing short surahs through songs, practicing daily prayers through playful activities, and storytelling about prophets in interactive formats. Religious instruction is embedded within play-based learning rather than delivered through rigid formal methods. School curriculum documents show that teachers are given flexibility to adjust learning activities according to weekly themes and students’ characteristics. The schedule provides a general framework rather than strict daily standardization, allowing creative modification across classrooms. As a result, variations in instructional practices are more dynamic compared to the Malaysian context.

Observations further reveal that teacher-student relationships are warm and personal. Children easily approach teachers when facing difficulties. Although discipline is maintained, it is implemented through persuasive communication rather than authoritative instruction. In summary, the IRE learning culture at TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah is constructed through religious habituation, teacher role modeling, emotionally supportive interactions, and curriculum flexibility that encourages pedagogical creativity.

Similarities and Differences in Learning Culture

Comparative analysis of both institutions reveals that Islamic Religious Education serves as the foundational framework for character formation in early childhood education. Both institutions emphasize daily prayer routines, religious value

internalization, and the central role of teachers as moral guides. However, significant differences emerge in implementation patterns. Tadika Alfikh Orchard demonstrates a standardized and structured learning culture characterized by collective discipline and systematic technology integration. In contrast, TK Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah reflects a flexible, relational, and habituation-based learning culture grounded in emotional interaction and contextual adaptation. These findings indicate that IRE learning culture is shaped not only by shared Islamic values but also by national curriculum policies and pedagogical orientations within each educational context.

DISCUSSION

Comparative Analysis of Learning Cultures

The findings presented above indicate distinct patterns in the IRE learning cultures at both institutions. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to theoretical frameworks and existing literature, examining the underlying factors that shape these differences and their broader implications for early childhood Islamic education. Research by Yuliana & Fadlillah (2021) shows that religious habit formation is the most effective strategy because it is in line with children's developmental stages. Teachers play an important role as role models (*uswah*), not just as instructors, so that interpersonal relationships become very close and warm. This is in line with the findings of Harfiani (2021), which confirm that a role model-based approach is easier for early childhood to grasp than verbal explanations.

The results of the study show that the learning culture of Islamic Religious Education at Aisyiyah Kindergarten (Indonesia) and Tadika Alfikh Orchard (Malaysia) is formed through dynamic interactions between religious values, national curricula, pedagogical practices, and the social cultures of each country. These cultural differences are distinctly manifested at two levels of analysis: explicitly embraced values and the basic assumptions underlying learning practices. The similarities in social, cultural, and religious values between Indonesia and Malaysia are important assets in shaping the learning culture in schools. An educational environment built on the basis of shared cultural values will facilitate the adaptation process for students and strengthen the internalization of moral and religious values from an early age (Azwar et al., 2024). The continuity and adaptation of Indonesian ethnic culture in Malaysia shows that shared cultural roots can be an important foundation in shaping the learning culture in schools. An educational environment based on shared cultural values will facilitate the adaptation process for students and support the internalization of moral, social, and religious values in learning activities (Sunarti et al., 2022).

At the level of values, there are fundamental differences between the two contexts. Malaysia places manners, discipline, and order as the main foundations of learning, reflecting the Malay-Islamic culture that upholds courtesy and compliance in social relations. On the other hand, Indonesia emphasizes morals, exemplary behavior, and

compassion as the core of character building, which is rooted in the tradition of Islamic education based on heart cultivation (*tarbiyah bil-uswah*) reinforced by educational institutions such as *Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah*. This difference in value orientation indicates a different emphasis: Malaysia on the formation of external behavioral order, while Indonesia on the development of internal moral awareness.

At a basic level, differences in learning culture are also related to broader dimensions of national culture. Malaysian society tends to have a higher power distance, which is reflected in a more hierarchical, orderly, and directive learning structure. This is evident in the role of teachers in *Tadika*, who serve as figures of authority and disciplinarians with strict boundaries. In contrast, Indonesian society exhibits higher levels of collectivism and femininity, which shape a learning culture that is warmer, more flexible, and prioritizes emotional closeness. These characteristics are in line with the humanistic approach in early childhood education and child-centered learning practices that emphasize the quality of affective interaction between teachers and students as the foundation for holistic development. A supportive learning culture that is in harmony with the cultural background of students has been proven to facilitate the adaptation process and improve their academic achievement (Handrianto & Solfema, 2025).

The difference between the two countries can also be seen in the use of learning media. In Malaysia, digital technology is a key element that strengthens the effectiveness of learning, while in Indonesia, learning relies more on direct interaction and concrete activities. Both countries show that religious learning is strongly shaped by its social context. Malaysia is in the context of strong educational modernization, so technology is the main means of internalizing religious values. Meanwhile, Indonesia is in a context of local culture and community values (such as *Muhammadiyah*), so that learning is more contextual and based on role models. These findings confirm that the culture of PAI learning in early childhood is a social construct that cannot be separated from the context of national education policy, cultural values of society, and pedagogical practices applied. This comparative study contributes to the theoretical understanding of how national cultural dimensions, particularly power distance, collectivism, and femininity, shape approaches to religious education at the preschool level. Furthermore, this research offers practical insights for the development of an Islamic education curriculum that is responsive to the diversity of socio-cultural contexts, while maintaining the essence of Islamic values.

A study by Setiawan & Mavianti (2025) shows that the use of the Canva application and audiovisual media can improve students' phonetic abilities and engagement in learning the *Hijaiyah* alphabet. Field data also shows that teachers routinely use digital devices in learning, and students show increased activity when the material is presented in a visual-interactive manner. This shows that technology has become an integral part of the learning culture, not just a tool. Based on the following indicators, here is a comparison table between cultures in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Table 1.1 Comparison Between Cultures in Indonesia and Malaysia

Indicator	Indonesia (Aisyiyah Muhammadiyah Kindergarten)	Malaysia (Tadika Alfikh Orchard)
Learning Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Humanistic and flexible - Uses a play-based learning approach. - Teachers tailor activities to the needs of each child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modern and structured. - Uses a highly focused child-centered learning approach. - Learning follows the KSPK standard module.
Focus on Instilled Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emphasizing morals, religious habits, and exemplary behavior. - Instilling Islamic values and Muhammadiyah principles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emphasizing manners, discipline, orderliness, and politeness. - The formation of orderly behavior is a top priority.
The Role of Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers as role models (<i>uswah</i>) - Warm and personal relationships - Persuasive and dialogical guidance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers as disciplinarians and authority figures - More formal and structured relationships - Directive and authority-based classroom management
Media & Learning Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited digital integration; relies on storytelling, singing, and play-based religious habituation - Learning emphasizes direct interaction and concrete experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High integration of digital media (Canva, audiovisual tools, projector-based slides) - Technology functions as an integral component of structured instruction
Curriculum Used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Merdeka PAUD curriculum is flexible, providing space for teacher creativity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK), nationally standardized and uniform
Regular Religious Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Daily prayers, dhuha prayers, memorization of short surahs, practicing simple manners. Done naturally during playtime. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Routine manners such as greeting others, lining up, praying before and after activities, and maintaining cleanliness.

		- Carried out in a highly structured and consistent manner.
Character Building Orientation	- Focus on emotional closeness, habituation, and internal moral reinforcement.	- Focus on collective discipline, orderly behavior, and self-control.
Sources of Cultural Influence	- Influenced by the values of community organizations (Muhammadiyah), local culture, and humanistic approaches.	- Influenced by Malay-Islamic culture, the value of courtesy, and a highly hierarchical education system
Teacher Independence in Teaching	Teachers are free to modify activities according to the children's characters.	Teachers strictly follow KSPK standards.
Learning Environment	Warm, adaptive, varied, and based on interpersonal interaction.	Orderly, consistent, structured, and highly organized

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the learning culture of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in early childhood institutions in Indonesia and Malaysia is shaped by the interaction between national education policies, socio-cultural values, and pedagogical orientations. The structured and technology-integrated approach implemented at Tadika Alfikh Orchard reflects a standardized and modernization-oriented education system, whereas the humanistic and habituation-based approach at TK Aisyiyah reflects a value-driven and community-based educational tradition. These differences indicate that learning culture is not merely a classroom practice but a socio-cultural construct embedded within broader national and institutional frameworks.

The findings demonstrate that differences in early childhood Islamic education practices in Indonesia and Malaysia are shaped by curriculum governance and cultural orientation. The Malaysian model reflects strong structural organization, centralized curriculum standards, consistent discipline, and systematic digital integration. In contrast, the Indonesian model emphasizes relational closeness, teacher role modeling (uswah), habituation through daily religious practices, and flexible, child-centered pedagogy. These differences indicate that Islamic learning culture is constructed not only through shared religious values but also through institutional structure and pedagogical orientation. Practically, Indonesian institutions may adopt elements from the Malaysian

approach, particularly clearer daily structuring, consistent discipline systems, and purposeful use of digital media to support Qur'anic and Hijaiyah learning. Conversely, Malaysian preschools may integrate aspects of the Indonesian model by strengthening emotional teacher–student relationships, expanding play-based religious habituation, and allowing greater pedagogical flexibility within the curriculum framework. A balanced integration of structured governance and relational character formation may produce a more adaptive and holistic model of early childhood Islamic education.

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