

Factors Influencing Parents' Preferences in Choosing MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal as an Islamic Values-Based Educational Institution

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the factors influencing parents' preferences in choosing MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal as an educational institution for their children, and how these preferences reflect the community's orientation toward religion-based education. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with in-depth interviews with 30 parents who chose MTsN 2 as a school for their children. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, where informants were selected based on certain criteria relevant to the research focus. Data analysis was conducted using interactive qualitative analysis techniques, through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that parents' preferences for MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal are not only based on religious reasons, but also on academic factors, teacher role models, student discipline, and the safety of the school environment. Most parents chose MTsN 2 because of the religious values taught at the madrasah, which are considered to help shape children's character and morals. In addition, parents feel that MTsN 2 is better able to maintain discipline and protect their children from negative influences often found in public schools. These findings illustrate that parental preferences are more complex and based on a more holistic combination of rational and social factors. This research contributes to the development of Islamic education theory by emphasizing the importance of balancing academic education and religious-based character development in educational institutions. The practical implication of these findings is the importance for madrasah administrators to continuously improve the quality of educational services, focusing not only on academic aspects but also on character development and strengthening religious values.

Keywords: Parental Preferences; Islamic Education; MTsN; Religious Values; Character Education

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi preferensi orang tua dalam memilih MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal sebagai lembaga pendidikan bagi anak-anak mereka, serta bagaimana preferensi ini mencerminkan orientasi masyarakat terhadap pendidikan berbasis agama. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan wawancara mendalam terhadap 30 orang tua murid yang memilih MTsN 2 sebagai sekolah untuk anak-anak

Diserahkan: 10-12-2025 **Disetujui:** 21-02-2026. **Dipublikasikan:** 28-02-2026

Kutipan: Asrin, A., Rohman, R., & Napitupulu, D. S. (2026). Factors Influencing Parents' Preferences in Choosing MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal as an Islamic Values-Based Educational Institution. *Ta'dibuna Jurnal Pendidikan Islam*, 15(1), 36-48. <https://doi.org/10.32832/tadibuna.v15i1.22308>.

mereka. Teknik sampling yang digunakan adalah purposive sampling, di mana informan dipilih berdasarkan kriteria tertentu yang relevan dengan fokus penelitian. Analisis data dilakukan dengan menggunakan teknik analisis kualitatif interaktif, melalui tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa preferensi orang tua terhadap MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal tidak hanya didasarkan pada alasan religius, tetapi juga pada faktor akademik, keteladanan guru, kedisiplinan siswa, dan keamanan lingkungan sekolah. Sebagian besar orang tua memilih MTsN 2 karena nilai agama yang diajarkan di madrasah tersebut, yang dianggap dapat membantu pembentukan karakter dan akhlak anak. Selain itu, orang tua merasa bahwa MTsN 2 lebih mampu menjaga disiplin dan melindungi anak-anak mereka dari pengaruh negatif yang sering ditemukan di sekolah umum. Temuan ini menggambarkan bahwa preferensi orang tua lebih kompleks dan didasarkan pada kombinasi faktor rasional dan sosial yang lebih holistik. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pengembangan teori pendidikan Islam dengan menekankan pentingnya keseimbangan antara pendidikan akademik dan pembinaan karakter berbasis agama dalam lembaga pendidikan. Implikasi praktis dari temuan ini adalah pentingnya pengelola madrasah untuk terus meningkatkan kualitas layanan pendidikan yang tidak hanya berfokus pada aspek akademik, tetapi juga pada pengembangan karakter dan penguatan nilai-nilai keagamaan.

Kata kunci : Preferensi Orang Tua; Pendidikan Islam; MTsN; Nilai Agama; Pendidikan Karakter

I. Introduction

In the dynamics of educational development in the modern era, parents' choices regarding educational institutions for their children have become increasingly diverse and influenced by various factors, both academic and non-academic. In Mandailing Natal Regency, there is an interesting phenomenon in the form of increasing interest among parents to enrol their children in State Islamic Junior High Schools, particularly MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal, even though there are popular public schools such as SMP Negeri 1 and SMP Negeri 2 that have an excellent reputation in academic aspects. This phenomenon reflects a certain preference among parents who believe that religious-based education not only provides scientific knowledge, but also shapes strong character and morality in children to face current social and cultural challenges. MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal, as a formal Islamic educational institution, is seen as capable of meeting these needs by integrating the national curriculum and deep religious values. Therefore, it is important to conduct a study to gain a deeper understanding of parents' views, interests, and reasons for choosing this madrasah as their primary choice for their children's junior secondary education.

This issue is significant in the context of Islamic Education because it reflects the community's need for an educational model that not only emphasises cognitive aspects but also integrates affective and spiritual dimensions. Historically and normatively, Islamic education aims to develop well-rounded individuals (*insān kāmil*) who possess a balance between knowledge, values, and behaviour. Parents' preference for MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal can be interpreted as a form of trust in institutions capable of realising the ideals of Islamic education. If this trend is not studied comprehensively, there will be

a gap between national-secular education policies and the aspirations of a religious society. Furthermore, a deep understanding of the reasons why parents choose religion-based education will make an important contribution to the formulation of Islamic education policies that are contextual, responsive, and oriented towards the real needs of the community.

Previous research on the factors influencing parents' preferences in choosing Islamic-based educational institutions shows that parents' decisions are greatly influenced by the integration of religious and local cultural values, teacher quality, school image, and the flagship programmes offered. A study in Bone, South Sulawesi, for example, highlights the importance of Bugis cultural heritage, particularly the concept of *siri' na pacce*, in parents' decisions to choose Islamic schools. Islamic schools in this region are considered more responsive to parents' expectations because they are able to integrate religious education with local cultural values, strengthen cultural identity, and shape culture-based character (Aziz et al., 2025).

In addition, research in Mataram found that teacher quality and school location are the most dominant factors in parental preferences, especially for parents who have careers and limited time to supervise their children directly. Teacher quality is a key determinant because it is considered to be able to effectively guide and shape children's characters (Murti et al., 2025). Another study in Medono also confirmed that active learning processes, safety, a conducive school climate, adequate facilities, information technology, school leadership, and religious education services such as TPQ and tahfidz are important considerations for parents. This shows that character education and religiosity remain top priorities (Fauyan et al., 2024).

Other factors that also influence parents' decisions are the school's reputation, tuition fees, accessibility, and parental involvement in the educational process. In the digital age, parents' considerations also include access to information and the use of technology in learning. These studies generally confirm that parents' preferences in choosing Islamic schools are not only based on religious aspects, but also on the quality of educational services, the integration of cultural values, and the school's readiness to face the challenges of modernisation.

Although there have been many studies examining parental preferences for religious-based schools, most previous studies have focused on the quality of academic education, location, or teacher quality as the main factors in school selection (Aziz et al., 2025; Murti et al., 2025). This study fills the research gap by focusing on how religious-based education can shape students' character and morals, and how parents' preferences for MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal are influenced by the balance between academic education needs and religious-based character building. In addition, many previous studies have not specifically examined the differences between the preferences of parents in

madrasahs and public schools, especially in areas such as Mandailing Natal, which has strong religious values in its community life. Therefore, this study identifies a research gap by exploring parental preferences in a highly religious local context and looking more deeply at how socio-cultural and religious factors play a role in their decisions.

Thus, this study contributes something new to Islamic education studies by examining parents' preferences for religious-based education at MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal, which focuses not only on academic factors but also on character building, morals, and religious values. This distinguishes this study from previous studies that emphasised academic aspects or teacher quality. Furthermore, this study explores the influence of strong socio-cultural factors in parents' decisions to choose madrasahs, a topic that has not been widely discussed in Islamic education literature. This study provides a comprehensive overview of how local communities face educational challenges amid increasingly complex changes.

The objectives of this study are as follows: first, to describe parents' views on religious-based education at MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal. Second, to analyse the factors that influence parents' interest in choosing MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal as their primary choice for junior secondary education. Third, to reveal the specific reasons behind parents' decisions to enrol their children in MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal rather than public schools such as SMP Negeri. Fourth, to assess the contribution of religious-based education in shaping the character and moral values of students amid the changing times.

II. Research Method

This study utilised a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because it was considered the most appropriate for exploring parents' views, interests, and reasons for choosing MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal as an educational institution for their children. Through this approach, the researcher sought to understand the subjective meaning contained in the educational decisions made by parents, as well as how these preferences were formed in the social, cultural, and religious context of the local community. The qualitative approach also allows researchers to explore in depth complex realities that cannot be measured numerically (Sugiyono, 2021). This study was conducted at MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal, Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra Province. This location was chosen purposively because it shows a phenomenon relevant to the focus of the study, namely the high level of community interest in junior secondary Islamic educational institutions.

The number of informants in this study consisted of 30 parents who had enrolled their children at MTsN 2. This number was chosen based on the consideration of obtaining representative data while still allowing for in-depth qualitative information. In addition, this study involved 5 supporting informants, namely the school principal, guidance

counsellor, and local community leaders who have an understanding of education in madrasahs and the social dynamics in the area.

The criteria for selecting informants were based on the research objective of understanding parents' preferences regarding religious-based education. The selected parents must meet the following criteria: first, they have enrolled their children in MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal; second, they have different views on religious education; and third, they are willing to be interviewed and share information related to their reasons for choosing MTsN 2. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, which is the deliberate selection of informants based on specific criteria relevant to the research focus. This technique was used because it allowed the researcher to obtain in-depth and relevant information, in line with the research objective of exploring the reasons and views of parents in choosing MTsN 2. Data analysis was conducted interactively using qualitative methods, involving data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, as developed by Miles and Huberman (Miles, M. B et al., 2014). This process was carried out continuously during data collection to ensure that the findings truly reflected the reality in the field (Sutopo, 2002). To ensure data validity, source triangulation and method triangulation techniques were used. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information from various informants, while method triangulation was carried out by using more than one data collection technique (Sanjaya, 2013). In addition, member checks were also carried out on informants to ensure that the transcribed data was in accordance with what the respondents meant.

III. Result and Discussion

A. Research Finding

This study reveals a number of key findings related to parents' preferences in choosing MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal as an educational institution for their children. These findings are mapped into several themes that reflect key factors in parents' decision-making.

1. Religioun Based- Education

Religious-based education at MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal is the main reason why many parents choose this school for their children. Parents believe that religious education at MTsN 2 is not limited to classroom lessons, but is also integrated into the daily lives of students. This can be seen from how the school combines religious knowledge with general knowledge, making education at MTsN 2 more holistic. Most parents say they chose MTsN 2 because, in addition to academics, their children are also equipped with strong morals and religious values. As stated by R:

"We chose MTsN 2 because, in addition to academics, my child is also equipped with strong morals and religious values. Here, they are taught to be people of noble character. Religious activities such as memorising the Qur'an every morning and regular recitations are also an important part of education at this school. Religious teaching at MTsN 2 not only covers theory but also facilitates students to practise religious values in their daily lives, which strengthens their faith and morals."

Some parents have planned to enrol their children in MTsN 2 long before their children have completed primary school. This interest stems from the madrasah's reputation for being religious, prestigious, and providing a safe and disciplined learning environment. MTsN 2 is considered to be stricter in terms of student discipline and more selective in monitoring student interactions, which gives parents a sense of security. In addition, the existence of additional activities such as Al-Qur'an memorisation and academic reinforcement also adds value that is not commonly found in public schools. The reason parents choose MTsN 2 over other schools is greatly influenced by the belief that madrasahs have a more balanced education system between worldly and spiritual aspects. Respondents assessed that public schools, despite having competent facilities and teaching staff, tend to pay less attention to religious values. Madrasahs are seen as places that not only educate but also nurture students to become people of faith, knowledge and good character. Madrasahs are also superior in terms of teacher role models, where teachers are active in socio-religious activities in the community and set direct examples in everyday life.

Another interesting finding is the negative perception of student behaviour in junior high schools, such as smoking, truancy, and playing games during school hours. Parents consider such behaviour to be less common at MTsN 2 due to stricter discipline enforcement and a consistent religious approach. Respondents even stated that madrasah teachers better reflect exemplary behaviour in daily life, both in their speech and in their religious social roles in the community. This is a distinct advantage that strengthens the position of madrasahs in the local education system. Researchers believe that trust in madrasahs stems not from image, but from the consistency of performance and values demonstrated by these institutions within the community.

2. Teacher Role Models

Teachers at MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal also play a major role in parents' decisions to choose this school. Parents not only regard teachers as academic instructors, but also as moral and spiritual role models for their children. Many parents choose MTsN 2 because they feel that the teachers at this school set a good example in everyday life. Mr S said,

"Teachers at MTsN 2 do more than just teach. They set an example in everyday life, such as maintaining worship, being polite, and caring for others."

This indicates that teachers at MTsN 2 not only teach knowledge but also set an example in moral behaviour and spirituality, which is very important for parents in shaping their children's character. Observations show that many teachers are active in social and religious activities in the community, such as leading recitations at the mosque and participating in social service programmes. Thus, teachers at MTsN 2 not only play a role in classroom learning but also in social life, inspiring students to emulate them.

3. Discipline and Environmental Safety

The aspects of discipline and environmental safety are also very important determining factors for parents in choosing MTsN 2. Many parents feel that MTsN 2 has a strict supervision and discipline system, which gives them a sense of security. Informant T stated that:

"At MTsN 2, my child is taught to be disciplined, and I feel safe because there is strict supervision of the children at school. The disciplinary policies implemented at MTsN 2 are not limited to classroom rules, but also include strict supervision of student activities outside of school hours. The school has a system in place to ensure that students are not exposed to negative influences, such as deviant behaviour or digital content that is not in line with the values taught.

Field observations also show that there are security officers who supervise student activities, both in the classroom and during break times. In addition, the use of mobile phones and access to the internet are strictly regulated, which shows that this school is very concerned about the safety and welfare of its students. Social and environmental factors also influence parents' decisions. Among the surrounding community, MTsN 2 has become the first choice, and only if their children are not accepted do parents consider public schools. This indicates the social legitimacy of madrasahs as leading educational institutions. Parents' expectations of MTsN 2 include an increase in capacity, quality of service, and better communication between teachers and parents. The researchers noted that this preference reflects the community's need for adaptive and high-quality Islamic education in the contemporary era.

4. Character Education and Spiritual Development

Character education and spiritual development at MTsN 2 are priorities in the effort to educate children to become individuals who are not only academically intelligent, but also have noble character and spiritual integrity. Many parents choose MTsN 2 because they feel that this school pays more attention to the moral character building and spiritual development of students. Mr H said,

"We chose MTsN 2 because this school pays great attention to shaping children's character, not just academic knowledge. In addition, the religious activities here are also very helpful for the spiritual development of children."

MTsN 2 not only provides lessons on morals and ethics, but also involves students in regular religious activities such as tahfiz Al-Qur'an and recitation. Observations show that students are actively involved in these activities, which not only help them improve their religious knowledge but also shape their personalities for the better. These activities provide students with the opportunity to deepen their understanding of Islamic teachings and apply them in their daily lives, so that they can grow into individuals with strong faith and good character.

B. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that parents' preference for MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal is based on a strong belief in the importance of religious-based education in shaping children's character and morals. This finding is in line with the Islamic educational framework, which places the spiritual dimension at the core of the learning process. As explained by Roqib (2021), religious-based education not only serves as a means to achieve intellectual competence but also as an instrument to foster good character. Therefore, parents not only want their children to be academically intelligent, but also to have integrity, empathy, and moral resilience. MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal is perceived as an institution that is able to integrate the general curriculum and the Islamic curriculum in a balanced manner, thus providing a platform that supports the formation of strong character and religious values. By integrating these two aspects, this madrasah responds to parents' needs to educate children who are not only intelligent but also have noble character, in accordance with the objectives of Islamic education to shape individuals who are knowledgeable and morally responsible to their God, their fellow human beings, and nature (Sholihah & Maulida, 2020).

Furthermore, these findings also indicate that parents' decision to choose MTsN 2 contains a broader rational dimension. The choice of madrasah is not only driven by ideological or emotional factors, but also by practical considerations regarding the protection of children from destructive social influences. This reinforces Coleman's Rational Choice Theory (1990), which states that individuals make decisions based on logical considerations to maximise benefits and minimise losses (Isa, 2017; Srigustini & Afriza, 2018). In this case, MTsN 2 is seen as a moral investment for the future of children, giving parents confidence that this institution is better able to protect children from deviant behaviour that often arises in public schools. This also reflects a crisis of confidence among some people towards public educational institutions, which are considered ineffective in shaping children's character holistically. Therefore, madrasahs such as MTsN 2 are an option that offers a safer and more morally profound education.

The findings of this study also confirm the importance of the socio-cultural context in shaping public perceptions of education. Using Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory, which explains that educational decisions cannot be separated from the values and norms of the

community (Mulyani & Hanani, 2023), we can understand that parents' preferences for MTsN 2 reflect the social and cultural aspirations of the highly religious Mandailing Natal community. Religion-based education in this madrasah is not only chosen as a means to improve children's academic achievement, but also as a way to preserve the cultural and religious identity of the community. As a formal educational institution, madrasahs are regarded as social institutions that uphold and teach social and religious values respected by the community. This is in line with the views of Nasir (2020) and Tambak & Sukenti (2020), who state that madrasahs play a role as moral bastions and symbols of the community's trust in religious-based education.

Furthermore, the results of this study also provide an overview that the Mandailing Natal community has a more critical and adaptive orientation towards education. Parents are not only interested in academic reputation, but also in the disciplinary system, teacher role models, and spiritual guidance provided by madrasahs. This shows that educational success in the eyes of the community is not only measured by national exam results or academic achievements alone, but also by changes in students' attitudes, behaviour, and personality. Thus, the existence of MTsN 2 as the primary choice for parents can be interpreted as a social response to the need for a more comprehensive and meaningful education, which focuses not only on the mastery of knowledge but also on the character building and moral integrity of children.

The findings of this study reinforce the findings of (Hidayat et al., 2026), which state that the main motivation for parents in choosing Islamic schools is the expectation of more intensive moral and religious education compared to public schools. In line with this, this study also supports Zakiah Daradjat's view, which emphasises that Islamic education aims to shape individuals who are not only intelligent but also have noble character and morals (Daradjat, 2004). In this context, parents' preference for MTsN 2 can be interpreted as an effort to realise the community's expectations for an education that balances academic ability with the formation of strong moral character, especially amid the increasingly complex challenges of globalisation (Al-Farabi et al., 2023; Hakim & Fitriana, 2018).

Parents' views emphasising the importance of religious education and teacher role models, as well as rational and contextual reasons, provide a comprehensive picture of their preferences. These findings indicate that educational decisions are not instantaneous, but rather part of a long process involving values, experiences, and future expectations. Therefore, this study makes an important contribution to understanding the psychosocial and cultural dimensions of choosing religious-based educational institutions. This study challenges the simplistic view that parents' preferences for religious education are merely a form of conservatism or religious tendencies. This study shows that modern parents still have value orientations, but they are also very critical of

the quality of the educational institutions they choose. Therefore, Islamic education does not only function as an ideological tool, but also as a strategic and realistic approach to educating children in the modern era. These findings also refute the old dichotomy that places madrasahs in an inferior position in the national education system, as madrasahs, especially MTsN 2, are considered more competitive, both in academic aspects and character building. This poses a challenge for public schools to reform their approach in providing more holistic educational services.

However, this study also shows that there are challenges for MTsN 2 in maintaining a balance between religious and academic education. Some parents expressed concerns about the quality of academic education, which may be less competitive than that of public schools. This is in line with the view of Zainuddin Syarif (2018), who stated that in the modern era, the challenge of religious character education is to integrate spiritual values with academic abilities that are relevant to the demands of the times. Therefore, madrasahs need to continue to innovate so that religious and academic education can go hand in hand, without sacrificing either one. The researcher argues that in order to maintain parental interest, madrasahs must be able to demonstrate that they can produce graduates who are not only of good character, but also academically intelligent.

This study also reflects changes in Mandailing Natal society, which increasingly desires a more balanced education between character and academic intelligence. Although religious values remain a priority, more and more parents are demanding that madrasahs produce graduates who are ready to compete in the world of work and wider society. This shows that society, although religious, is beginning to realise the importance of developing strong academic skills alongside character building. As explained by Coleman (1990) in his Theory of Rational Choice, parents choose madrasahs as a long-term investment in their children's future, which includes moral and academic development (Srigustini & Afriza, 2018). Parents' choice of MTsN 2 is the result of rational considerations that take into account the long-term benefits for their children in this increasingly complex era.

These findings indicate that parents' preferences for MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal are influenced by factors that are more complex than simply choosing between religious-based or academic education. Their decision is driven by the need to build good character, protect children from negative influences, and provide a balanced education between religion and academics. Therefore, MTsN 2 and other madrasahs need to continue to strengthen the quality of religious and academic education in a balanced manner in order to meet parents' expectations and make a real contribution to the education of children in Indonesia.

Thus, this study not only provides empirical validation of Islamic education theory but also contributes to the development of Islamic education policies that are more

contextual and responsive to community needs, as well as integrating worldly and spiritual aspects in creating perfect human beings. As a recommendation, madrasahs need to continue to innovate in response to changing times and the expectations of modern society, while maintaining the religious values that form the main foundation of education.

This study broadens the understanding that has so far viewed parents' preferences for religious education solely as a form of conservatism or religious tendencies. Through qualitative data obtained directly from informants, it was found that the choice of MTsN 2 was also based on rational, academic, and social considerations. Thus, the simplistic understanding of parents' motivations in choosing madrasahs as purely religious is inadequate. This study shows that modern parents still have value orientations, but remain critical of the quality of the educational institutions they choose. This indicates that preferences for Islamic education are not solely ideological, but also strategic and realistic. In addition to broadening perspectives, the results of this study also challenge the assumption that public schools such as SMP Negeri are always the first choice because they are considered academically superior. In areas such as Mandailing Natal, madrasahs are actually considered more competitive, both in terms of achievement and character building. This challenges the old dichotomy that places madrasahs in an inferior position in the national education system. This study presents empirical data that madrasahs are not only accepted because of their religious content, but also because of other institutional advantages such as student supervision systems, teacher involvement in mentoring, and a more intensive learning structure. Therefore, the results of this study can be used as evaluation material for public schools to reformulate their approach to educational services.

Relevance of the Research to Existing Literature: These findings reinforce the theory of Islamic education, which places balance between worldly and spiritual aspects as the basis for shaping a complete human being (Mujahid, 2021). This view is in line with the concept of *insān kāmil* in classical and contemporary Islamic education studies. On the other hand, the approach of parental educational preferences in this study also reinforces the theory of Rational Choice, which was previously often considered irrelevant to explain phenomena in traditional communities. This study shows that communities with a strong Islamic background still use cost-benefit logic in choosing educational institutions. In other words, the results of this study contribute to the synthesis between Islamic and sociological approaches in educational studies.

IV. Conclusion

This study aims to analyse the factors that influence parents' preferences in choosing MTsN 2 Mandailing Natal as a religious-based educational institution for their children. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that parents' preferences are driven

by several factors, including academic quality, teacher role models, student discipline, and school environment safety. In addition, the main reason parents choose MTsN 2 is their belief that this madrasah is able to combine academic education with the reinforcement of religious values, which are very important in shaping children's character. These findings answer the research objective by showing that parents prioritise education that not only covers academic aspects but also the character and morals of their children. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the development of Islamic education theory by emphasising the importance of balancing academic education and religious character building. This study enriches our understanding of how religion-based education can shape students' character in facing increasingly complex social and cultural challenges. In practical terms, the findings of this study provide recommendations for the management of MTsN 2 to continue improving the quality of education that integrates religious values and character, as well as strengthening the discipline system and teacher role models. Madrasah administrators also need to maintain effective communication with parents to support the overall development of students.

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