

THE APPLICATION OF TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION IN INCREASING STUDENTS' SOCIAL AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

Transformative education in senior high schools plays an important role in balancing academic achievement with the formation of students' social and religious characters, in line with the perspective of Islamic Religious Education. This study aims to examine how the implementation process of transformative education is carried out at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City, as well as assess the results achieved in strengthening students' social awareness and responsibility. The research used a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. Data were obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation, then validated using source triangulation and member checks to ensure credibility. The results show that transformative education is successfully integrated in the curriculum through social and religious value-based learning, which encourages students' active involvement in social activities such as fundraising, community empowerment, and environmental preservation. On the other hand, the main challenges arise from the dominance of the academic paradigm that often shifts the priority of social character development, the limited role of teachers outside the principal, and the lack of maximum parental involvement. The implications of this research emphasize the need for synergy between schools, teachers, parents and communities so that transformative education is sustainable and contextual to culture and religious values. The recommendations in this study are the need for a more systematic curriculum design based on Islamic Religious Education values and strengthening collaborative strategies across parties to produce graduates who excel academically while caring socially.

Keywords: *Transformative Education; Social Awareness; Responsibility*

A. Introduction

High schools have a crucial position in shaping a young generation that is not only academically superior, but also morally, socially and religiously strong. In the era of globalization and the swift flow of information, educational institutions are required to produce students who are critical, empathetic, and contribute significantly to social life. According to (Latifah, 2020) asserts that the integration of Islamic values such as honesty, discipline, empathy, and tolerance in the curriculum effectively shapes students' character and social skills. Furthermore, according to (Latifah, 2014) which shows that a curriculum based on morality and ethics of honesty significantly supports the formation of Islamic character of students in secondary schools. Hence, these various perspectives confirm that transformative education is not just a learning method, but a paradigm that places students as active subjects in their educational process. With this paradigm, students are formed to come with critical awareness, social responsibility, and moral courage in the face of social injustice.

Within the framework of Islamic values, the concept of transformative education has strong legitimacy. Al-Ghazali's thinking about moral education emphasizes the importance of habituation, exemplary, and purification of the soul (*tazkiyyah an-nafs*), so that true education not only instills knowledge, but also forms morals and spirituality that are intact (Rika, et.al. 2021). In addition, Nurcholish Madjid also emphasized that education should be a process of human liberation from the shackles of ignorance, injustice, and backwardness, so that it is in line with the orientation of transformative education that emphasizes social justice (Indy, 2019) . In addition, according to (Hasan, 2024) which explains that the integration of character education in Islamic education management can strengthen students' moral, spiritual, and social responsibility awareness by involving teachers, curriculum, and school environment as agents of change. Thus, transformative education in the perspective of PAI can be understood as a comprehensive effort to integrate knowledge, morality, and social devotion in students.

However, the reality at SMA Dharmawangsa Medan City shows that there is a gap between these ideals and the practice in the field. The school has indeed attempted to integrate the values of justice, solidarity and respect for diversity into learning, but students still tend to be trapped in the dominant academic paradigm. For example, most students prioritize achieving test scores and class rankings over involvement in school social activities. Extracurricular activities such as community service or social service are often seen as secondary rather than an integral part of the educational process. In fact, teachers and parents tend to give more appreciation to academic achievement than to students' social care attitudes. This phenomenon is in line with the findings of (Burgos & Carnero, 2020) which highlights that the dominance of the academic paradigm often hinders the formation of students' social character.

This *gap* indicates an important *knowledge gap*. Not many studies have comprehensively explored how PAI-based transformative education is implemented at the

secondary school level in Medan, what real challenges teachers and students face, and to what extent this strategy has an impact on the formation of students' social awareness and responsibility. Therefore, this study is relevant to fill the void. The focus is to examine how the curriculum and educational practices at Dharmawangsa High School can move from mere academic achievement to the formation of strong social-religious characters. Thus, the results of the research are expected to provide recommendations for curriculum development and educational policies that are more inclusive, based on social and religious values, and relevant to the real needs of the younger generation in the current era of globalization.

B. Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive research type. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore in depth how the implementation of transformative education based on Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is implemented at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City and its impact on the formation of students' social awareness and responsibility. According to (Cresswell, 2002) qualitative research allows researchers to understand the meaning constructed by participants in a particular social context, so it is very relevant to explain the processes and experiences in this study.

The research participants were determined using purposive sampling technique, which is the selection of informants who are considered to best understand the problem under study. There were 11 informants in total: 1 principal, 3 PAI teachers, 5 active students in intracurricular and extracurricular activities, and 2 student council administrators. The selection criteria included their direct involvement in planning, implementing or experiencing transformative education. This technique is effective because it targets "*information-rich*" and highly in-depth individuals, in line with the approach in recent qualitative studies (Supriandi, 2025). Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation studies. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted 45-60 minutes, allowing informants to share their views openly. Questions such as, "How are social justice and empathy integrated in PAI learning?" and "What are the main challenges in internalizing transformative education?" served as a guide. Observations were conducted for three months (February-April 2025), with a frequency of 2-3 times a week, covering PAI learning classes, religious activities, and student council meetings. This method is important to capture the nuances of interactions and real situations that are not always revealed through interviews alone (Saldana, et.al. 2014)

Documentation includes lesson plans, PAI syllabus, student council activity reports, and school policies related to character. These documents serve as written evidence and as data verification. Data analysis used an interactive model (Huberman, 1992) through three stages: data reduction (categorizing and focusing important data), data presentation (in the form of a matrix or thematic narrative), and conclusion drawing and verification (identifying patterns and main themes). This model was chosen because it is transparent and structured, making it easier to understand and trace data in qualitative studies

Furthermore, to ensure validity, this research applies source and method triangulation. Data from interviews, observations, and documentation were synthesized comparatively, for example, teachers' statements about the value of solidarity were tested with the results of classroom observations and the contents of lesson plans. This triangulation is not just a term, but an analytical strategy to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

With this comprehensive methodology, the research is expected to provide valid, contextual, and applicable findings. The findings will not only fill the *knowledge gap* in the literature on transformative PAI education in high schools, but also contribute practical recommendations for curriculum development, learning strategies, and character education policies that are inclusive and relevant in the contemporary era.

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Findings

This study found that the integration of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City has produced a significant impact in shaping students' social awareness and responsibility. Data were obtained through interviews with the principal, teachers, and students, plus direct observation and documentation review. In general, transformative education in this school is not only oriented towards academic achievement, but is also geared towards character building through real social experiences. Although it shows positive results, the implementation of this program still faces challenges, including the resistance of some students who are more focused on academic achievement and limited facility support. The following is a detailed presentation of the research findings.

a. Implementation of Transformative Education in Learning

The integration of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City is most clearly seen in the practice of learning Islamic Religious Education (PAI). This subject is positioned not only as a space to study religious texts, but also as a means to instill the values of social justice, empathy, and concern for the surrounding environment. Teachers try to link teaching materials with social realities so that students can understand that religious values do not stop at the cognitive level, but must be realized in real action.

In an interview, an Islamic Education teacher explained: "*We relate Qur'anic verses to real conditions, for example when discussing justice, students are asked to observe cases of social injustice in their neighborhood.*" Learning practices do not only take the form of lectures, but also encourage critical reflection through discussions, case studies, and social projects. For example, students are involved in fundraising activities for disaster victims. One student said: "*I feel that learning religion is more meaningful when we can directly help the community, not just memorize verses.*"

This finding is in line with the view of (Sulisworo & Dahlan, 2025) which states that transformative education functions to free students from social injustice through the formation of critical awareness. However, not all students have similar experiences; some still view social activities as an additional burden that is less relevant to academic achievement. This condition shows that the success of transformative education is not

enough with practical involvement, but must be accompanied by a process of critical reflection. In another view, as asserted by (Hoggan & Kloubert, 2020) that transformative experiences are only truly meaningful when students are able to reflect on the meaning of these experiences. Thus, the implementation of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City not only requires active participation, but also needs to ensure a space for reflection that allows students to realize the social value of each activity undertaken.

b. Increasing Students' Social Awareness

Increased social awareness is one of the important achievements of the implementation of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City. This awareness is reflected in students' involvement in various school-initiated social programs, both in the form of community empowerment activities and environmental actions. These activities not only encourage students to understand social issues theoretically, but also give them the opportunity to play a direct role in the field. In practice, some students even began to show personal initiative to propose activity ideas. A PAI teacher said: *"Now it is the children who propose social programs, such as visits to orphanages."* Observations also showed that students were active in organizing environmental activities, ranging from community service to school cleaning campaigns. However, this motivation is not fully shared. When interviewed, one student admitted: *"If it's not an obligation from school, maybe I won't participate."*

This phenomenon shows that although students' social awareness has increased, some students still undergo social activities as a formal obligation. This finding is in line with John Dewey's theory which emphasizes that education should involve real social experiences so that students are able to connect theory with practice (Mubarok, 2024). The risk of tokenism, where only a handful of students actually experience change, is also apparent as warned (Segal & Wagaman, 2017) that social participation is often influenced by personal motivation and environmental support.

Thus, although students' social awareness in general shows a positive trend, the big challenge faced by schools is how to ensure equity and sustainability of such awareness. Therefore, critical reflection strategies and continuous mentoring are important so that student participation does not stop at the level of formality, but rather grows as an intrinsic awareness that fosters genuine concern for social issues around them.

c. Character Building Through Extracurricular

Extracurricular activities at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City are an important medium in strengthening social values and shaping student character. Through these activities, students are given the space to hone their leadership skills, practice empathy, and experience real social experiences. Programs such as seminars on social justice, leadership training, and social service actions provide opportunities for students to learn outside the classroom, while fostering a sense of concern for others.

One student council administrator expressed her experience: *"Through the student council social service, I learned not only to lead the event, but also to understand the difficulties of others."* This expression reflects that collaborative activities are able to foster empathic awareness, in line with the findings of (Vann & Rith, 2025) which emphasize the importance of social cooperation in building moral leadership. However, the reality in the field shows that there are challenges. Some students find it difficult to manage their time, especially when social activities coincide with exams. One student said: *"If there is an exam, I am forced to be absent from social activities."* This shows the clash between academic orientation and transformative agenda, as explained by (Illeris, 2014) that transformative education often faces the dominance of academic culture.

Thus, extracurricular activities do serve as a strategic vehicle for strengthening student character, but their effectiveness is highly dependent on the ability of schools and students to balance academic and social demands. Without this balance, there is a risk that transformative activities are only considered as additional activities, not as an integral part of character building.

d. Challenges in Implementing Transformative Education

The implementation of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City is not entirely smooth. Behind the successes shown, there are a number of obstacles that test the school's commitment in integrating social values into the education process. These challenges mainly arise from external and internal factors, ranging from parents' perceptions to limited school resources. When asked *"What are the main challenges in internalizing transformative education?"*, the principal explained: *"Some parents still think that social activities interfere with children's academic grades, so full support is difficult to obtain."* In addition, facility and budget constraints limit the variety of social activities that can be implemented. This view shows that resistance does not only come from students, but also from the family environment that still places academic achievement as the top priority.

This condition is in line with the findings of (Burgos & Carnero, 2020) which emphasizes that the academic paradigm still dominates, hindering the character building agenda. Therefore, schools need a more holistic curriculum strategy, which balances academic achievement with social character strengthening. In this way, transformative education does not only become a discourse, but is truly internalized in daily educational practices and receives full support from all parties.

e. The Principal's Role in Strategic Development

In implementing transformative education, the principal's leadership is a key factor that determines the direction and sustainability of the program. The principal not only acts as an administrative manager, but also as a prime mover who ensures that transformative values are truly integrated in educational policies and practices. This effort is evident in the school's planning strategy that involves teachers, students and parents in the preparation of social programs. In response, the principal emphasized: *"We want to make sure that social activities are not just additional activities, but part of the school curriculum."* This statement is

reflected in the review of the Annual Work Plan (RKT) and Learning Implementation Plan (RPP), which contain the values of social justice, solidarity, and commitment to strengthening student character. The integration of these planning documents shows the seriousness of the school in institutionalizing transformative education. This finding is in line with (Mustafiyanti, 2024) which asserts that the transformative leadership of the principal functions as a driving force for social change in schools. Thus, the role of the principal is not only to ensure the running of the curriculum, but also to ensure that transformative education becomes an integral part of the school culture supported by all stakeholders.

f. Evaluation of the Impact of Transformative Education on Students

Evaluations show a positive impact on students' empathy and social responsibility. For example, one student said: *"Since participating in school community service, I care more about protecting the environment around my house."* This is in line with the view of (Chandra, 2025) that transformative education equips students to think critically and act against injustice (*International Journal of Transformative Education*). However, some students feel that social activities are just a formality. *"Sometimes we participate just to fulfill attendance, not because we really care,"* said a student. This condition reinforces the warning (Illeris, 2014) that without critical reflection, transformative education only produces superficial and unsustainable transformations.

Based on the explanation above, the author therefore concludes that overall, the integration of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City has contributed significantly to increasing students' social awareness. However, this success is highly dependent on critical reflection, parental support, principal leadership, and the balance between academic and social demands. The emerging positive potential must be balanced with mitigating the risks of formality, limited facilities, and uneven student participation. With a collaborative approach, transformative education has the opportunity to become an important model in building a generation that is intellectually intelligent while having high social integrity.

2. Discussion

This research shows that the implementation of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City has a real impact on increasing students' social awareness and responsibility. Activities such as fundraising for natural disasters, community empowerment projects, and discussions on social issues succeeded in fostering empathy and care. Education based on real experiences has proven to be more effective than mere theory, as students learn directly from the social problems around them. This is in line with the results of research by Fahrurrozi et al. which confirms that experiential learning is able to improve students' critical understanding as well as their academic achievement (Fahrurrozi 2025). Thus, educational transformation not only provides space for reflection, but also makes students agents of change in society.

The successful implementation of transformative education does not stand alone. There are internal school factors that greatly influence, such as visionary principal leadership, teachers who consistently provide assistance, and a school culture that emphasizes collaboration. The principal plays an important role in creating a vision that integrates academics with character building, in line with the views of Sholeh et al. who stated that curriculum transformation requires leadership that is able to unite social and academic values. (Suprpto, S., & Nasir, 2023) In addition, external factors also strengthen, ranging from parental support, the tradition of community cooperation, to national policies on Strengthening Character Education (PPK). The interaction between internal and external factors is what makes transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City successful in creating a significant impact.

The religious dimension, especially in relation to Islamic Religious Education (PAI), further enriches the analysis. The values of empathy, care, and social responsibility instilled through school activities are basically the implementation of Islamic teachings. The concept of *ukhuwah insaniyah* emphasizes the importance of human brotherhood, while the Qur'an commands people to help each other in goodness (QS. Al-Maidah: 2). The findings of this study are in line with the views of Tuhur et al. who emphasize that Islamic education has a strategic role in building students' social ethics through real practices in schools (Indayani & Hartati, 2023)

In an interview, a PAI teacher mentioned that students' involvement in social action is not just a school assignment, but an act of worship that has value in the sight of Allah. This view shows that transformative education associated with PAI gives a double meaning: students carry out curricular obligations as well as worship. Activities such as fundraising can be interpreted as the application of the values of *zakat*, *infaq*, and *sadaqah*. This supports Saepudin's research which states that schools play a major role in shaping social ethics through contextualized Islamic education (Saepudin, 2021)

However, the implementation of transformative education is not free from challenges. Not all students are actively involved; some consider social activities as an additional burden that interferes with academic focus. There are also parents who are more concerned about academic grades than their children's social engagement. Teachers face the constraints of a heavy curriculum load, making it difficult to integrate social activities into formal learning. A critical question arises: is increased social awareness achieved by all students or only a small group that already has a tendency to be active? This concern is relevant to the research of Husniah et al. who highlighted that the formation of religious and social character is strongly influenced by self-efficacy and support from the educational environment (Husniah et al., 2025). If not taken seriously, transformative education has the potential to become a symbolic program that only involves some students. Therefore, schools need to create more inclusive strategies, for example by integrating social activities into subjects, including PAI, so that all students can be involved equally.

Overall, this research proves that the implementation of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City is able to form caring, critical and responsible students. The integration of internal factors, external support, and the strengthening of Islamic values results in an approach that not only improves intellectual achievement, but also fosters social-spiritual character. Although there are still challenges in implementation, the commitment of schools, teachers, parents and the community is the key to the sustainability of this program. In the future, transformative education linked to Islamic perspectives has the potential to become an effective model for forming young people who excel academically while having social sensitivity and moral responsibility in social life.

E. Conclusion

This research confirms that the implementation of transformative education at Dharmawangsa High School in Medan City significantly contributes to the improvement of students' social awareness and responsibility. The main findings show that students' involvement in social projects, fundraising, and discussion of community issues builds both critical and empathetic characters. This success is supported by internal factors such as the leadership of the principal, the role of teachers and a collaborative school culture, as well as external factors such as the support of parents, the community and national education policies. The integration of Islamic Religious Education values (ukhuwah, amanah, and social responsibility) makes the experience more meaningful, because students view social activities as not just curricular demands, but part of the practice of faith.

Theoretically, this study strengthens the view that transformative education can connect academic aspects with socio-religious character building, while practically it is a holistic learning model that is relevant to be implemented in other schools. However, the limitation of this study lies in the scope that only covers one school, so further studies are needed in various socio-cultural contexts to expand the generalizability of the findings. Practical recommendations that can be proposed are the need for other schools to integrate social activities into the curriculum and Islamic value-based extracurricular activities, so that the younger generation not only excels academically, but is also noble, caring and responsible for society.

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