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## Strengthening Social Identity: The Role of Islamic Schools in Urban Muslim Communities

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Article Information	Abstract
<b>Received:</b> 1 February 2025	<i>This qualitative phenomenological study examines the role of SD Ulul Albab as an Islamic school in shaping the social identity of urban Muslim communities in Jember. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured, and curriculum document analysis. Using Miles' interactive analysis model and triangulation validation, the findings reveal three key aspects: First, Strengthening collective identity through structured programs (Qur'an memorisation, congregational prayers, family-based activities) that foster social cohesion, consistent with Tajfel &amp; Turner's social identity theory regarding the cognitive-evaluative-affective functions of groups; Second, the dialectic between strong religious identity preservation and adaptation challenges in pluralistic societies, demonstrating the complexity of value internalisation according to Ellemers; Third, the potential for exclusivity as a logical consequence of intensive group identity formation, as anticipated in Tajfel's concept of ingroup favouritism. While providing theoretical contributions to understanding Islamic education as a medium for urban identity construction, the single-case study limitation necessitates follow-up comparative and longitudinal research. Practically, these findings recommend an integrative educational model that maintains Islamic distinctiveness while developing multicultural competencies as a response to the challenges of Indonesia's increasingly pluralistic urban society.</i>
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<b>Keywords:</b> <i>Islamic School, Social Identity, Urban Muslim Communities.</i>	<p>Penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi ini mengkaji peran SD Ulul Albab sebagai sekolah Islam dalam membentuk identitas sosial komunitas Muslim perkotaan di Jember. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipan, wawancara semi-terstruktur serta analisis dokumen kurikulum. Dengan analisis model interaktif Miles dan validasi triangulasi, temuan mengungkap tiga aspek utama: Pertama, Penguatan identitas kolektif melalui program terstruktur (<i>tahfiz</i>, shalat berjamaah, kegiatan keluarga) yang menumbuhkan kohesi sosial, sesuai teori identitas sosial Tajfel &amp; Turner tentang</p>

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fungsi kognitif-evaluatif-afektif kelompok. Kedua, Dialektika antara preservasi identitas keagamaan yang kuat dengan tantangan adaptasi dalam masyarakat majemuk yang menunjukkan kompleksitas internalisasi nilai menurut Ellemers. Ketiga, Potensi eksklusivitas sebagai konsekuensi logis dari intensitas pembentukan identitas kelompok, sebagaimana diantisipasi dalam konsep Tajfel tentang in-group favoritism. Meski memberikan kontribusi teoretis dalam memahami pendidikan Islam sebagai medium konstruksi identitas urban, keterbatasan studi kasus tunggal memerlukan penelitian lanjutan yang bersifat komparatif dan longitudinal. Secara praktis, temuan ini merekomendasikan model pendidikan integratif yang mempertahankan kekhasan Islami sekaligus mengembangkan kompetensi multikultural, sebagai respons terhadap tantangan masyarakat urban Indonesia yang semakin plural.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the intersection between Islamic education and urban societal dynamics has garnered significant academic interest due to its pivotal role in shaping individual and communal identities (Hefner, 2008; Lipka, 2017). Islamic schools, particularly in urban settings, have been instrumental in addressing the challenges of globalisation while preserving traditional religious values. These institutions often act as a bridge, integrating modern educational frameworks with Islamic values to create a holistic learning environment (Ahmed, 2013; Parker & Raihani, 2011). This phenomenon is particularly relevant in countries like Indonesia, where the demand for Islamic education reflects societal concerns about moral erosion and the need for a balanced approach to education (Amal, 2021). Several studies highlight the motivational factors influencing parents to opt for Islamic schools, including superior moral instruction, advanced facilities, and community engagement (Emawati, 2020; Tan, 2014). However, while these schools cater to both educational and spiritual needs, their role in fostering social identity among urban Muslims remains underexplored. This is especially pertinent in cities where cultural diversity and modernity challenge traditional Islamic values, necessitating a deeper understanding of how Islamic schools contribute to social cohesion and religious identity (Asad, 2003; Rissanen, 2014).

Social identity refers to an individual's self-concept derived from their awareness of belonging to a social group, along with the emotional value and significance

attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978). According to social identity theory (as a theory of social change), the three key elements of social identity are cognitive, evaluative, and emotional (Ellemers et al., 1999). These elements relate, respectively, to the similarities among community members (Algesheimer et al., 2005), commitment or attachment (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), and value associations (Menatti et al., 2019). The cognitive element involves how individuals categorise themselves into different social groups based on their affiliations, fostering a sense of belonging and identity (Tajfel, 1978). Through evaluation, they develop a psychological dependence on the group, which, when combined, strengthens their emotional connection to the collective (Du et al., 2007).

Urbanisation and globalisation have created complex social dynamics in which religious identities often intersect with pluralistic modern values. In this context, Islamic schools do not merely function as formal educational institutions but also serve as social spaces that shape students' worldviews, values, and interactions with their surrounding communities. Previous studies have tended to overlook how this process occurs at the micro-level, particularly in urban settings in Indonesia, where the pressure to adapt to modernity frequently clashes with efforts to preserve Islamic identity (Rofhani, 2015). Thus, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring the role of Islamic schools in shaping social identity through a more holistic and contextual approach.

The main research problem lies in understanding the role of Islamic schools in reinforcing social and religious identities in urban Muslim communities, where the rapid pace of globalisation and urbanisation often leads to a dilution of traditional values (Parker & Raihani, 2011). A general solution involves analysing how Islamic schools integrate religious education with modern curricula to nurture well-rounded individuals who can navigate the complexities of urban life without compromising their religious identity (Tan, 2014). This dual approach is critical in ensuring that students are not only academically competent but also morally grounded, enabling them to contribute positively to their communities while maintaining their Islamic values.

Existing literature, such as that by Pribadi (2022) and Tubaka and Kamala, (2016), emphasises the symbolic role of Islamic schools in urban Muslim communities as centres for preserving and promoting religious identity (Azra, 1999). These studies suggest that Islamic schools are not just educational institutions but also platforms for reinforcing social solidarity and cultural heritage (Hornsey, 2008). However, they often focus on macro-level impacts, such as societal perceptions and demographic preferences, without delving deeply into the mechanisms of identity formation at the individual level. Despite these contributions, there is a noticeable research gap in understanding the longitudinal impact of Islamic schools on students' identity development and their ability to adapt to diverse urban environments. This study seeks to address these gaps by focusing on a case study of Elementary School (SD) Ulul Albab in Jember, which integrates religious values into its educational practices while operating in a culturally diverse urban setting.

This study aims to examine how Islamic schools contribute to the formation and reinforcement of social and religious identities in urban Muslim communities. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the micro-level dynamics of identity formation within a culturally diverse urban context, providing insights into the interplay between education, religion, and modernity. By investigating SD Ulul Albab, this study offers a unique perspective on the strategies employed by Islamic schools to balance traditional values with contemporary societal demands, addressing a critical gap in the existing literature.

## **II. METHOD**

This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the role of Islamic schools in shaping social and religious identities in urban Muslim communities. The research was conducted at Elementary School (SD) Ulul Albab, an integrated Islamic primary school located in Jember, East Java, Indonesia. The school was chosen for its distinctive approach to integrating modern educational frameworks with Islamic values, making it suitable for understanding the dynamics of identity formation in a culturally diverse urban environment (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The researchers collected comprehensive data by selecting informants based on their depth of

knowledge and direct involvement in religious and social identity-building activities within the school. These informants included the principal, the head of the foundation, teachers, student guardians, community leaders, and students. Those involved are individuals who have experiences that are directly aligned with the research objectives, thus increasing the depth and relevance of the data. This diverse group provided a holistic perspective on the role of the school and its wider social impact (Tisdell et al., 2025).

Data collection was conducted using a combination of non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Observations were conducted over 3 months with the aim of capturing daily school activities, such as congregational prayers, *tahfiz* classes, and community-based events. These observations provided valuable insights into the practical application of Islamic values in daily school activities (Spradley, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to dig deeper into the participants' perceptions and experiences, especially regarding the integration of religious education and its impact on students and the community. The interviews lasted for 30-45 minutes and were recorded using a mobile phone. Documents such as the school curriculum and activity records were analysed to understand the formal mechanisms that support the school's mission.

Data analysis followed the interactive model outlined by Miles et al., (2014) that systematic approach to analysing qualitative data that involves several interrelated and interactive stages. The model consists of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. This process is carried out continuously until the data is saturated, meaning that no significant new information is found. Data reduction was done by summarising and selecting relevant information to identify key themes. Data display was done by organising findings into visual matrices and narrative summaries to establish relationships between observed phenomena. Conclusions were then drawn and verified through triangulation, member checking, and discussions with peers to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings (Fadli, 2021).

### **III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal the significant role of Elementary School (SD) Ulul Albab, an Islamic-integrated school, in shaping the social and religious identities of its students and influencing the broader urban Muslim community in Jember. The results are summarised and discussed under the following themes:

#### **The Role of Islamic Schools in Strengthening Students' Social and Religious Identity**

Islamic schools that integrate religious and secular curricula have become a preferred solution for parents dissatisfied with conventional public schools or madrasahs. While Islamic schools offer stronger religious foundations, their appeal extends beyond this—urban Muslim families willingly choose them despite higher costs, drawn by intensive Islamic activities and values (Halstead, 2004). Programs like Qur'an memorisation (*tahfiz*), congregational prayers, moral education, and religious chants (*nadhoman*) build trust among parents. As the foundation chairperson explained in an interview:

*"We designed this school to be an Islamic learning hub that cultivates strong religious identity in children and the community."*

This vision reflects the school's early commitment to social-religious identity, rooted in the urban Muslim community's demand for faith-based education, particularly among its middle-class and migrant demographics. The school reinforces religious identity not only through parent communities and monthly Qur'anic studies but also via daily practices for teachers and students. The principal emphasised:

*"We ensure students internalise Islamic values through routines like congregational prayers, tahfiz, and moral habituation."*

Islamic values are integrated into daily interactions, such as greetings (*salaman wulak walik*) and wearing *kopiah* (Islamic caps) as religious symbols. A religion teacher added:

*"We teach Islam through practice—communal work (gotong royong), ethics (adab), and responsibility in religious activities."*

Parents observed tangible changes; one remarked:

*"My child now reminds us to pray and shows greater politeness."*

Another noted improved social awareness:

*"My child is more empathetic and confident in their Muslim identity—crucial in our diverse urban environment."*

Observations of *dhuha* prayers and Qur'an memorisation sessions revealed disciplined participation, illustrating how the school embeds worship into students' daily lives. Monthly family study sessions further strengthen Islamic identity by engaging parents and students in joint learning. The school's holistic approach includes: *First*, Religious identity through worship habituation, ensuring practical application of Islamic teachings. *Second*, Social character internalisation, fostering empathy and tolerance. *Third*, Family involvement, creating synergy between school and home. *Fourth*, Urban Muslim identity formation, preparing students to navigate pluralistic societies. As evidenced, SD Ulul Albab serves as both an educational institution and a social-religious anchor for Jember's urban Muslim community.

### **Islamic Schools Shape Urban Muslim Perspectives to Strengthen Social Identity**

The presence of Islamic schools significantly influences the perspectives of urban Muslim communities. As articulated by the foundation chairman in an interview:

*"Our school has become more than an educational institution—the community sees us as a pillar for instilling Islamic values in children from an early age."*

School events like Islamic holiday celebrations actively engage parents and locals, fostering social cohesion. A classroom teacher emphasised:

*"Our teaching methods ensure students don't just learn Islamic theory but practice it daily, making them moral exemplars in their communities."* This approach resonates with parents; one remarked: *"This school convinced me of the necessity of strong Islamic education to navigate urban cultural challenges."*

Observations of the Prophet's Birthday (*Maulid Nabi*) celebration revealed the school's role as a social hub. Students recited Islamic poetry and led collective prayers attended by families and community leaders. Monthly religious lectures (*pengajian*) further strengthened this bond, with discussions on preserving Islamic values in urban life. Community service initiatives like "*Jumat Berkah*" (Blessed Friday), distributing staple food packages, demonstrated the school's commitment to social solidarity. A community leader noted:

*"This school is a social anchor, uniting Muslims in Jember's diverse environment."*

Analysis of interviews and observations reveals four key impacts: (1) Positive perceptions of Islamic education as vital for social identity in pluralistic urban settings; (2) Cultivation of Islamic ethics, where students become ambassadors of moral behaviour; (3) School as a socio-religious centre, hosting events that affirm communal Muslim identity; and (4) Strengthened social solidarity through charity programs that bridge the school and wider society (Sapriallah et al., 2020). These findings underscore how Islamic schools like SD Ulul Albab transcend academic roles to become catalysts for social and religious cohesion in urban Muslim communities.

### **Social Impact and Contestation of Islamic Schools in Urban Muslim Community Dynamics**

The principal emphasised the school's positive social impact, stating:

*"We serve not just as an educational institution but as a hub for strengthening Islamic values in Jember."*

Community-inclusive activities like collective prayers and religious festivals foster solidarity, though some question the intensive religious curriculum. A religion teacher defended the approach:

*"While some view our methods as traditional, these values are crucial to counter modern influences."* Parents acknowledged the benefits, with one noting: *"This school shields our children from un-Islamic influences,"* while another admitted: *"My child struggles to adapt with peers from non-Islamic schools."*

A community leader affirmed the school's role in preserving Muslim identity but raised concerns about social isolation. Observations revealed nuanced dynamics. Open congregational prayers and religious festivals strengthened communal bonds, with students performing Islamic poetry and lectures. However, some criticised the predominance of conservative viewpoints in discussions. Social initiatives like food distribution (*sembako*) were praised, yet stakeholders urged diversification beyond religious activities. A student's testimony captured this tension:

*"I feel safe with schoolmates who share my values but awkward in diverse settings."*

The findings demonstrate how SD Ulul Albab's practices align with and complicate social identity theory Tajfel (1978) in three key dimensions. *First*, the cognitive aspect of identity formation manifests through the school's structured religious activities daily prayers and Qur'an memorisation create clear ingroup



boundaries, exemplifying Tajfel's (1988) concept of social categorisation. This resonates with Ellemers et al., (1999) framework, where such rituals establish the cognitive awareness of group membership.

*Second*, the evaluative component emerges in parents' descriptions of the school as a "moral anchor," reflecting what Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) term psychological commitment to the group. However, this strong ingroup valuation creates tension when students encounter out-group interactions about intergroup relations (Turner et al., 1979).

*Third*, the emotional dimension surfaces most visibly during religious festivals, where collective pride in Islamic identity aligns with Menatti et al., (2019) findings about emotional significance in group belonging. Yet the study reveals how this emotional attachment can simultaneously foster solidarity and social boundaries a paradox noted in Algesheimer et al., (2005) work on religious communities.

The school's attempt to balance identity preservation with social integration through interfaith programs engages with the concept of "identity nesting." However, our findings suggest this remains an ongoing negotiation rather than a resolved synthesis. This tension between strong group identity and pluralistic adaptation reflects the core dilemma in social identity theory's application to religious education.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the vital role of Islamic schools, particularly SD Ulul Albab in Jember, in strengthening the social and religious identities of urban Muslim communities. The key findings indicate that the school functions not only as an educational institution but also as a centre for reinforcing Islamic values through an integrative learning approach. Islamic-based programs, such as Qur'an memorisation (*tahfiz*), communal prayers, and parenting activities, contribute to the character development of students, fostering both religious and positive social attitudes. The implications of these findings include a deeper understanding of how Islamic education can provide solutions to the challenges of globalisation that impact the cultural and religious identities of urban societies. However, the study also notes

challenges, such as the limited social interaction of students with more heterogeneous communities. This underscores the need for a more inclusive approach without compromising core Islamic values.

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