

Reinterpreting Environmental Education Through The Framework of Iman, Islam, And Ihsan: An Ecopedagogical Perspective in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract: The global ecological crisis indicates that environmental education oriented primarily toward knowledge transmission has not been fully effective in fostering sustainable ecological behavior. While ecopedagogy studies have emphasized critical consciousness and sustainability, relatively few have integrated spirituality as a foundational dimension of ecological awareness, particularly in early childhood education. This study aims to describe the implementation of environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan, Ciamis Regency, West Java, Indonesia; reinterpret it through the Iman–Islam–Ihsan framework; and formulate an Iman–Islam–Ihsan Ecopedagogical Model as a paradigm for environmental education in early childhood settings. The study employed a qualitative approach using an intrinsic case study design. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field notes involving the principal, teachers, parents, and children. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of data analysis through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings reveal that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan is implemented integratively through nature-based learning, the habituation of ecological practices, and the internalization of Islamic values. The study identifies three developmental stages of ecological consciousness: Iman as ecological awareness, Islam as ecological responsibility, and Ihsan as ecological character. Based on these findings, the study proposes the Iman–Islam–Ihsan Ecopedagogical Model, which describes a transformative process from spiritual awareness to ecological responsibility, ecological character, and ultimately the formation of a sustainable ecological lifestyle. This study contributes to the advancement of ecopedagogy theory by introducing the concept of spiritual ecological consciousness as a novel perspective for environmental education in early childhood education.

Keywords: environmental education; ecopedagogy; Iman–Islam–Ihsan; spiritual ecological consciousness; early childhood education.

Introduction

The environmental crisis has developed into one of the most serious civilizational challenges of the twenty-first century. The latest synthesis report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) confirms that human activities have caused global warming of approximately 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels, resulting in increasing frequencies of extreme heatwaves, droughts, floods, wildfires, and disruptions to global ecological systems (Calvin dkk., 2023). At the same time, a report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) indicates that the world is facing what is referred to as the *triple planetary crisis*, namely climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution, which are interconnected and mutually exacerbate one another (Zhang, 2021). Data from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) indicate that global wildlife populations have declined by an average of 69% since 1970, while the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that more than 10 million hectares of forest are lost annually due to human activities (*Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020*, 2020). These phenomena demonstrate that environmental problems can no longer be understood merely as local or sectoral issues, but rather as multidimensional crises that threaten the sustainability of human life and the planet as a whole.

These global conditions are also reflected in the Indonesian context. Data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry indicate that waste management, river pollution, land degradation, and ecosystem destruction remain serious challenges to sustainable development. Indonesia generates more than 68 million tons of waste annually, most of which has not yet been optimally managed. In addition, various ecological disasters, such as floods, landslides, droughts, and forest fires, are occurring with increasing frequency as a result of changes in land use and climate change (Ardi Risman, Firman Maulana, Ruhyat Hardansyah, Lenny dkk., 2024). This situation indicates that the environmental crisis is not merely a technical problem, but also a cultural, ethical, and educational issue related to how human beings perceive and treat nature.

Various environmental scholars argue that the root of modern ecological problems lies in the human paradigm for understanding the relationship between humanity and nature. Capra explains that the environmental crisis arises from a mechanistic worldview that separates human beings from the broader web of life (Capra, 1997). Modernity has generated an anthropocentric paradigm that positions humans at the center of life and nature as an object of exploitation for economic and developmental interests. Consequently, the relationship between humans and nature has shifted from one characterized by participation and harmony to one characterized by

domination and exploitation. In a similar vein, Orr emphasizes that the ecological crisis is fundamentally an educational crisis because modern education systems have succeeded in producing individuals who are academically intelligent but have failed to develop adequate ecological awareness (Orr, 2011). Therefore, addressing the environmental crisis requires a transformation of the educational paradigm capable of changing ways of thinking, ways of living, and human relationships with the environment.

Awareness of the importance of education in addressing the environmental crisis has encouraged the emergence of various approaches, including environmental education (EE), education for sustainable development (ESD), and ecological literacy. UNESCO emphasizes that education is a key instrument for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 13 on climate action (UNESCO, 2020). From this perspective, environmental education is no longer understood merely as the transmission of knowledge about nature, but as a process of transforming values, awareness, and actions that enables learners to participate in creating a sustainable future.

Further developments have given rise to the ecopedagogy paradigm, which is rooted in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. Freire views education as a process of liberation that enables human beings to develop critical consciousness (*conscientização*) regarding oppressive social realities (Freire, 2000). This idea was subsequently expanded by Moacir Gadotti into the context of the ecological crisis through the concept of ecopedagogy, which aims to develop *planetary citizenship*, namely an awareness that human beings are part of a global community of life and therefore have a moral responsibility for the sustainability of the Earth (Gadotti, 2008). From this perspective, environmental education is not merely intended to change individual behavior, but also to develop critical awareness of the relationships among the environment, social justice, culture, economics, and politics.

Gadotti's ideas are supported by the concept of ecological literacy developed by David Orr and the systems thinking approach proposed by Fritjof Capra. Orr argues that one of the primary goals of twenty-first-century education is to develop ecological literacy that enables human beings to understand the fundamental principles of life and sustainability (Orr, 2010). Meanwhile, Capra emphasizes the importance of understanding the world as an interconnected living system, or a *web of life*, so that human beings no longer perceive themselves as separate from nature (Capra & Luisi, 2014). His idea was further reinforced by Stephen Sterling through the concept of sustainable education, which positions education as a means of transforming paradigms toward sustainability (Sterling, 2001). According to Sterling, education must move beyond a model of knowledge transmission toward a model of consciousness transformation capable of changing how human beings understand the relationship between self, society, and the environment.

Nevertheless, most ecopedagogical theories developed to date remain rooted in Western educational philosophy traditions oriented toward social, political, and ecological dimensions. Spiritual and religious dimensions as sources for developing ecological awareness have received relatively limited attention. Yet recent studies indicate that religion can serve as a powerful source of moral motivation for fostering pro-environmental behavior and socio-ecological sustainability (Wakhidah & Erman, 2022). This limitation indicates the need for a more inclusive ecopedagogical perspective that integrates spirituality as an integral component of ecological awareness development.

Within this context, the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr offers an important perspective on the relationship between religion and the environment. Nasr argues that the modern environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis arising from the loss of human awareness of the sacredness of nature as a manifestation of God's signs (*ayat kauniyah*) (Nasr, 1996). According to Nasr, modernity has desacralized nature, causing human beings to lose their metaphysical orientation in interacting with the environment. Meanwhile, Khalid emphasizes that Islam provides a strong ethical and spiritual framework for establishing a harmonious relationship between humans and nature through the principles of *tawhid*, *khalifah*, *amanah*, and balance (*mizan*) (Foltz, 2021). This perspective demonstrates that environmental conservation is not merely an ecological action, but also a form of religious and moral responsibility.

The dialogue between Freire, Gadotti, Orr, Capra, and Sterling, on the one hand, and Nasr and Khalid, on the other, reveals an important point of convergence. While Freire emphasizes critical consciousness, Gadotti develops the concept of planetary citizenship, Orr emphasizes ecological literacy, Capra proposes a systemic paradigm, and Sterling advocates educational transformation toward sustainability, Nasr and Khalid add a spiritual dimension that connects ecological awareness with awareness of God. Thus, environmental education is not only understood as an effort to develop the relationship between humans and nature, but also as a process of developing the relationship between humans and God through the preservation of His creation.

In the Islamic context, one potential framework for integrating spiritual, pedagogical, and ecological dimensions is the concept of *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan*. These three concepts constitute fundamental structures of Islamic teachings as explained in the Hadith of Gabriel and represent the dimensions of belief (faith), practice, and virtue. Nevertheless, studies of environmental education from an Islamic perspective have predominantly focused on concepts such as *tawhid*, *khalifah*, *amanah*, *ecothology*, and environmental jurisprudence. Research employing the framework of *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan* as a paradigm for environmental education remains very limited, particularly in the context of early childhood education.

Based on the literature review, at least three research gaps underlie this study. First, environmental education research remains dominated by approaches emphasizing environmental literacy and behavioral change, while spirituality as a foundation of ecological awareness has not been sufficiently explored conceptually or empirically (Ardoin dkk., 2020). Second, environmental education research from an Islamic perspective generally employs *tawhid*, *khalifah*, *amanah*, and ecotheology as normative foundations, but has yet to develop a pedagogical framework that systematically explains the stages of ecological awareness development (Taufikin, 2025). Third, the integration of an ecopedagogical perspective with the *Iman–Islam–Ihsan* framework in the context of early childhood education remains rarely addressed in both international and national literature. This is particularly significant because early childhood is a critical period for the formation of values, character, and sustainable life habits.

Based on these gaps, this study proposes a novelty in the form of a reinterpretation of environmental education through the framework of *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan* within an ecopedagogical perspective in early childhood education. Unlike previous studies that employ the concept of *khalifah* or ecotheology as the foundation of environmental education, this study constructs a conceptual model that positions *Iman* as the foundation of ecological awareness, *Islam* as the basis of ecological responsibility, and *Ihsan* as the manifestation of ecological character. This model offers a new understanding of environmental education as a process of developing spiritual-ecological awareness that occurs progressively and integratively from early childhood.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of ecopedagogy by extending a paradigm that has traditionally been dominated by Western critical pedagogy toward an approach that integrates Islamic spirituality. This study also bridges Freire's concept of critical consciousness, Gadotti's planetary citizenship, Orr's ecological literacy, Capra's interconnectedness of living systems, Sterling's transformative education, and Nasr and Khalid's ecological spirituality into a single conceptual framework contextualized for Muslim communities. Practically, this study offers an alternative paradigm for developing environmental education in early childhood education that not only cultivates ecological knowledge and behavior, but also develops spiritual awareness, moral responsibility, and ecological character as foundations for the sustainability of life.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of environmental education phenomena occurring within the natural context of nature-based early childhood education and Islamic values. The research focus was not directed toward testing hypotheses or measuring relationships among variables, but rather toward exploring the meanings, values, beliefs, experiences, and pedagogical practices that shape the process of internalizing children's ecological awareness through the framework of *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan*. A qualitative approach enables researchers to understand social phenomena holistically from the perspectives of participants and within the real-life contexts in which such phenomena occur (Creswell, 2015).

Epistemologically, this study was grounded in the constructivist-interpretive paradigm, which views social reality as a construction of meaning developed through human interactions with their social and cultural environments. Within this paradigm, environmental education is understood not merely as a set of learning activities, but as a process of meaning-making involving interactions among teachers, children, parents, the natural environment, and religious values embedded within the school community. Therefore, understanding environmental education practices cannot be separated from the social, cultural, and spiritual contexts in which these practices take place.

An intrinsic case study design was selected because the research focused on a single case that possessed unique characteristics and was valuable to understand in depth, namely the implementation of environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan Ciamis. According to Stake, an intrinsic case study is used when researchers have a particular interest in a case because of its distinctiveness and uniqueness, rather than primarily to generate theoretical generalizations (Stake, 2010). In this study, TK Alam Al-Hasan was considered an interesting case because it integrates nature-based education with Islamic spiritual values in early childhood education practices. The case study approach enabled the researcher to comprehensively understand how environmental education was implemented, how the values of *Iman–Islam–Ihsan* were understood by members of the school community, and how these processes contributed to the development of children's ecological awareness.

The research was conducted at TK Alam Al-Hasan Ciamis, Ciamis Regency, West Java Province, Indonesia. The site was purposively selected based on the consideration that the school implements nature-based learning integrated with character education and Islamic values. Various school programs, including gardening, food crop cultivation, environmental conservation, organic and inorganic waste management, animal care, exploration of the surrounding environment, outdoor learning, and religious habituation, constitute integral components of the daily educational process. These characteristics make TK Alam Al-Hasan a relevant context for examining the relationship between environmental education, Islamic spirituality, and the development of ecological character in early childhood.

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, namely the selection of informants based on their experience, knowledge, and direct involvement in the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). The participants consisted of one school principal, five teachers, ten parents of students, and thirty-five children aged 4–6 years who participated in educational programs at TK Alam Al-Hasan. The school principal was selected because of their role in school policy planning and curriculum development. Teachers were selected because they were directly involved in implementing environmental education. Parents were selected to provide perspectives on the continuity of children's ecological practices within the family environment, while the students served as the primary source of data regarding the manifestation of ecological behaviors developed through the learning process.

Data were collected throughout the research period using four main techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, document analysis, and reflective field notes. Participant observation was conducted to directly observe environmental education activities, including gardening, plant maintenance, waste management, school environmental conservation, nature exploration, outdoor learning, and clean-living habituation. Through observation, the researcher obtained data concerning children's ecological behaviors, patterns of interaction between teachers and students, and the integration of *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan* values into learning practices.

In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with the school principal, teachers, and parents of students. The interviews aimed to explore participants' understanding of environmental education, the ecological values developed at school, the learning practices implemented, and their perceptions of the development of children's ecological character. The semi-structured technique was selected because it provided the researcher with flexibility to explore issues that emerged during the interviews while maintaining a focus on the research objectives.

Document analysis was conducted on various relevant documents, including the school curriculum, teaching modules, learning activity plans, child development journals, student portfolios, documentation of school activities, photographs of learning activities, environmental program reports, and other institutional documents. These documents were used to understand how ecological and spiritual values were integrated into educational policies and practices.

In addition, the researcher maintained reflective field notes throughout the research process. These notes contained descriptions of observed phenomena, the researcher's reflections on interactions occurring in the field, children's emotional responses to environmental activities, and preliminary interpretations of emerging data. The use of reflective field notes is important in qualitative research because it enables researchers to document the process of meaning construction that occurs throughout the study (Saldaña, 2021).

To ensure data depth and accuracy, the study employed methodological triangulation, source triangulation, and time triangulation. Data obtained through observation were compared with interview findings and documentation, thereby enabling cross-verification of the information obtained. This triangulation strategy was intended to enhance the credibility and accuracy of the research interpretation.

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously from the beginning of data collection until the completion of the study using the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles dkk., 2014). During the data condensation stage, all interview results were transcribed, followed by open coding, axial coding, and categorization to identify themes related to environmental education, Islamic spirituality, and ecological character development. The data were subsequently displayed in the form of thematic matrices, concept maps, and descriptive narratives to facilitate the interpretation process.

The final stage of the analysis involved thematic interpretation and synthesis by connecting empirical findings with the theoretical frameworks of ecopedagogy, Islamic cosmology, and the *Iman–Islam–Ihsan* trilogy. Through this process, the researcher identified patterns of relationships among ecological awareness, ecological responsibility, and ecological character that developed through educational practices at TK Alam Al-Hasan. The results of the analysis were subsequently used to formulate the *Iman–Islam–Ihsan Ecopedagogical Model*, a conceptual model explaining the stages of children's ecological character development through the internalization of Islamic values in environmental education.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through the application of the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement in the field, and peer debriefing. Transferability was achieved through the provision of rich contextual descriptions (*thick description*), while dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail, systematic documentation of the research process, and researcher reflexivity. Recent studies indicate that member checking remains an important procedure for enhancing the quality of interpretation in qualitative research when applied contextually and reflexively (McLeod, 2024).

The research was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, including respect for participants, data confidentiality, and the protection of children as a vulnerable group. Prior to the commencement of the study, the researcher obtained official permission from the school and explained the research objectives, procedures,

benefits, and use of data to all participants. Voluntary informed consent was obtained from all adult informants, while the involvement of students was carried out after obtaining consent from their parents or legal guardians. The identities of all participants were anonymized in the research report to maintain their confidentiality and privacy.

Results and Discussion

1. Implementation of Environmental Education at TK Alam Al-Hasan Ciamis

The research findings indicate that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan Ciamis is implemented holistically through the integration of the curriculum, school culture, learning activities, and religious habituation embedded in everyday school life. Environmental education is not positioned as a stand-alone subject but is integrated throughout the learning process through approaches such as *nature-based learning*, *experiential learning*, and character habituation grounded in Islamic values.

An analysis of curriculum documents, teaching modules, student development journals, and annual school programs indicates that environmental themes are integrated into more than 70% of learning activities conducted throughout the academic year. Environmental education is incorporated into various hands-on activities, including planting and caring for food crops, maintaining school cleanliness, sorting and reusing waste, caring for animals, and directly exploring the natural environment. These activities are designed to foster environmental awareness, responsibility, independence, and ecological consciousness among children from an early age through contextual and nature-based learning experiences. School documentation indicates that during the 2025–2026 academic year, there were at least 48 outdoor learning activities that directly involved children in interaction with the natural environment.

Participant observation conducted over a four-month period showed that the natural environment served as the primary learning resource in students' daily activities. Children routinely participated in gardening, planting vegetables, caring for family medicinal plants, feeding school livestock, observing plant growth, harvesting garden produce, sorting waste, exploring the environment surrounding the school, and participating in the school's nature-based student scout activities. Based on observations of 35 students, the following findings were obtained:

Table 1. Participation in Ecological Behaviors

Ecological Behavior Indicator	Number of Children	Percentage
Actively involved in gardening activities	31	89%
Able to care for plants independently	29	83%
Able to sort waste according to category	29	82%
Demonstrated water-saving behavior during ablution (<i>wudu</i>)	30	86%
Demonstrated concern for animals	32	91%
Reminded peers to maintain cleanliness	26	74%
Demonstrated initiative in cleaning the environment without teacher instruction	24	69%

The data indicate that the majority of students had developed basic ecological behaviors that appeared consistently in their daily activities.

The observational findings also revealed that environmental activities were not perceived as additional activities, but rather as an integral part of the school's daily routine. Every morning, students participated in watering plants on a rotating basis. During the research period, an average of 20–25 minutes per day was allocated to maintaining the school environment. In addition, each class had a mini-garden that students were jointly responsible for maintaining. One teacher explained:

“We do not teach about the environment only through stories or pictures. Children have to experience it directly. They plant, water, fertilize, watch the plants grow, and even harvest them themselves. From these experiences, they learn that plants are also God's creatures that must be cared for.”(*Teacher Interview, February 12, 2026*)

This statement indicates that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan is constructed through direct experiences that enable children to develop emotional connections with nature.

The observations also showed that teachers consistently integrated Islamic values into ecological activities. During gardening activities, teachers often connected planting activities with the hadith concerning ecological charity. When children fed animals, teachers explained the importance of showing compassion toward all of God's creatures. When students cleaned the school environment, teachers connected the activity with the concept of *an-nadhafah min al-iman* (cleanliness is part of faith).

This integration can be observed across various learning activities, as presented in the following table.

Table 2. Integration of Environmental Education and Islamic Values

Environmental Activity	Integrated Islamic Value
Planting and caring for plants	Ecological charity and gratitude for Allah's blessings
Feeding animals	<i>Rahmah</i> (compassion) toward all creatures
Saving water during ablution	Prohibition of <i>israf</i> (excessiveness)
Cleaning the environment	Cleanliness as part of faith
Managing waste	<i>Amanah</i> (trust/responsibility) to protect the Earth
Caring for school plants	Responsibility as <i>khalifah</i> (steward)

The interview with the school principal further reinforced these findings. According to the school principal: “Our goal is not merely to make children love the environment. We want them to understand that caring for the environment is part of worship and an expression of gratitude to Allah. Therefore, all environmental activities are always connected with Islamic values.” (*School Principal Interview, February 13, 2026*)

This statement demonstrates that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan is built upon a spiritual-ecological paradigm that views the relationship between humans and nature as part of the relationship between humans and Allah.

Similar findings also emerged from interviews with students' parents. Of the ten parents interviewed, eight reported that their children had begun to demonstrate changes in ecological behavior at home after participating in the school program. The most frequently reported changes included watering plants, disposing of waste properly, reminding family members to conserve water, and demonstrating concern for pets.

One parent stated:

“Now, whenever my child sees an open faucet, they immediately turn it off. They even often remind us not to waste water because, as they say, water is an *amanah* from Allah.” (*Parent 4 Interview, February 26, 2026*)

These findings indicate that the internalization of ecological values does not occur only at school but is also transferred to the family environment.

Thematic analysis of the observation data, interviews, documentation, and field notes generated three main themes that characterize the implementation of environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan:

- Nature-based learning, which positions the environment as the primary source of learning.
- Ecological habituation, which is implemented through routines and teacher modeling.
- Islamic ecological values, which connect ecological activities with the concepts of *iman*, *amanah*, *khalifah*, gratitude (*syukur*), and *ihsan*.

These three themes constitute a holistic environmental education system because they simultaneously integrate cognitive, affective, behavioral, social, and spiritual dimensions. The findings demonstrate that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan is not solely oriented toward developing ecological literacy but also toward fostering spiritual-ecological awareness as the foundation for the development of ecological responsibility and ecological character among young children.

2. Reinterpreting Environmental Education through the *Iman–Islam–Ihsan* Framework from an Ecopedagogical Perspective

Thematic analysis of observation data, interviews, documentation, and field notes indicates that environmental education practices at TK Alam Al-Hasan cannot be adequately explained solely through the conventional environmental education paradigm oriented toward ecological literacy or through the Western ecopedagogy paradigm focused on critical ecological consciousness. The field findings reveal a spiritual dimension that is consistently present throughout environmental learning activities. Therefore, this study reinterprets environmental education as a pedagogical process that unfolds through three stages of ecological consciousness development: *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan*.

The open coding process generated 47 initial codes, which were subsequently reduced to 12 categories and then constructed into three major themes forming the environmental pedagogical model at TK Alam Al-Hasan.

Table 3. Coding Results and Theme Construction

Initial Code	Category	Main Theme
Admiring God's creation	God-consciousness	<i>Iman</i>
Observing the beauty of nature	Ecological awareness	<i>Iman</i>
Expressing gratitude for nature	Ecological spirituality	<i>Iman</i>
Nature as God's creation	Eco-theological awareness	<i>Iman</i>
Watering plants	Ecological responsibility	<i>Islam</i>
Saving water	Ecological behavior	<i>Islam</i>

Caring for animals	Ecological <i>amanah</i>	<i>Islam</i>
Maintaining cleanliness	<i>Khalifah</i> practice	<i>Islam</i>
Picking up litter without being asked	Ecological initiative	<i>Ihsan</i>
Reminding peers	Socio-ecological concern	<i>Ihsan</i>
Helping injured animals	Ecological empathy	<i>Ihsan</i>
Voluntarily caring for the environment	Ecological character	<i>Ihsan</i>

Cross-source analysis indicates that these three themes do not emerge as separate categories; rather, they constitute interconnected stages in the development of ecological awareness.

3. Iman as Ecological Awareness

The first theme emerging from the data is *Iman* as the foundation of ecological awareness. Based on the observations, children were consistently encouraged to understand nature as God's creation that contains signs of His greatness. Teachers did not introduce the environment merely as an object of knowledge, but as part of the *ayat kauniyah* (signs of God's creation in the natural world) that should be observed, appreciated, and respected.

Throughout the field observations, it was found that almost all nature exploration activities began with spiritual reflection. When observing butterflies, trees, rain, or small animals, teachers connected these phenomena with the greatness of Allah.

As Teacher 2 explained: “Before children learn about plants, we invite them to recognize that plants are created by Allah. Once they develop a sense of wonder toward Allah's creation, they usually find it easier to love and care for it.” (*Teacher 2 Interview*)

A similar finding was expressed by the school principal:

“We want children to know nature not merely as living things, but as an *amanah* from Allah. This awareness becomes the foundation of all environmental activities at school.” (*School Principal Interview*)

The observations showed that 33 out of 35 children (94%) were able to relate natural phenomena to theological concepts when teachers conducted simple reflections following nature observation activities. For example, children described rain as “a gift from Allah for plants” or referred to trees as “Allah's creation that provides oxygen.”

These findings indicate that the ecological awareness developed at TK Alam Al-Hasan is rooted in theological awareness. Therefore, this study reinterprets the dimension of *Iman* as Ecological Awareness.

Islam as Ecological Responsibility. The second theme emerging from the data is *Islam* as ecological responsibility. After children recognize nature as God's creation, they are guided to practice various forms of responsibility toward the environment.

The observations showed that ecological behaviors were developed through the school's daily routines. During the research period, the following patterns were identified:

- 89% of children actively participated in gardening activities.
- 86% of children demonstrated water-saving behavior during ablution (*wudu*).
- 82% of children were able to sort waste according to its category.
- 91% of children routinely fed the animals kept by the school.

These behaviors were not taught merely as technical rules but were consistently connected to the concepts of *khalifah* (stewardship), *amanah* (trust/responsibility), and *mizan* (balance).

Teacher 4 explained: “Children are not simply told to water the plants. They are taught that plants are entrusted to us by Allah and therefore must be cared for.” (*Teacher 4 Interview*)

One parent also stated: “At home, my child often reminds us not to leave the faucet running. My child says that water is an *amanah* from Allah.” (*Parent Interview*)

These findings demonstrate that the ecological practices performed by children have developed into forms of moral responsibility rooted in religious beliefs. Therefore, this study reinterprets the dimension of *Islam* as Ecological Responsibility.

4. Ihsan as Ecological Character

The third theme emerging from the data is *Ihsan* as ecological character. This theme indicates a deeper level of value internalization compared with the two preceding stages.

The observations identified various ecological behaviors that emerged spontaneously without teacher instruction. During the research period, the following behaviors were recorded:

- 69% of children picked up litter without being asked.
- 74% of children reminded their peers not to litter.
- 71% of children demonstrated concern for wilting plants.
- 77% of children demonstrated empathy toward injured or hungry animals.

Field notes dated March 18, 2026, documented an incident in which a child stopped playing to feed a kitten

in front of the school mosque. After helping the kitten, the child said:

“It's a creature of Allah too.”

Similar incidents occurred repeatedly in various observational contexts, indicating that ecological behavior was no longer dependent on external control or teacher supervision.

Teacher 1 explained:

“At first, children care for the environment because they are guided by the teacher. Over time, they begin doing it on their own. They even often remind us.” (*Teacher 1 Interview*)

These data indicate that ecological concern has developed into a component of the children's moral identity. Therefore, this study reinterprets the dimension of *Ihsan* as Ecological Character.

Conceptual Model Constructed from the Field Findings

Based on the synthesis of all data, this study developed a conceptual model explaining that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan occurs through a gradual process of transformation:

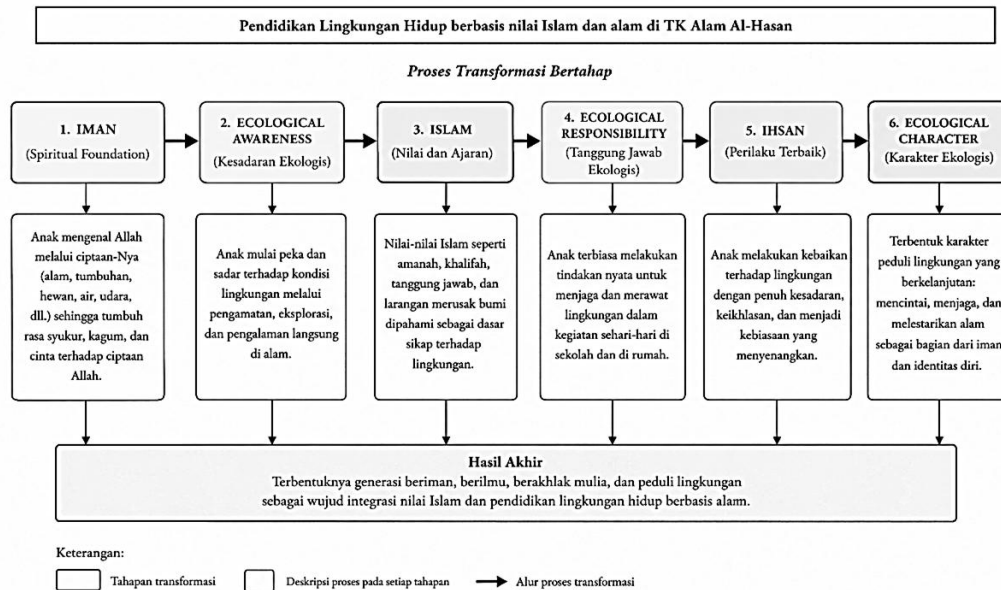


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Environmental Education at TK Alam Al-Hasan

This model demonstrates that the development of ecological character does not begin with behavior, but rather with spiritual awareness of the relationship between human beings, Allah, and nature. This awareness subsequently develops into ecological responsibility and is ultimately internalized as ecological character.

Thus, the findings of this study indicate that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan is not merely a process of developing ecological literacy, but rather a process of spiritual-ecological transformation that simultaneously integrates theological, pedagogical, and ecological dimensions. These findings extend the ecopedagogy paradigm by demonstrating that Islamic spirituality can function as a foundation for developing ecological awareness in early childhood education.

5. The Iman–Islam–Ihsan-Based Ecopedagogical Model in Early Childhood Education

Thematic analysis of observation data, interviews, documentation, and field notes indicates that environmental education practices at TK Alam Al-Hasan not only produce ecological behaviors among children but also shape a pattern of ecological awareness development that occurs gradually and continuously. Based on the processes of coding, categorization, and thematic synthesis, this study formulated a conceptual construct referred to as the *Iman–Islam–Ihsan Ecopedagogical Model*.

This model emerged from the empirical finding that all environmental education activities at TK Alam Al-Hasan consistently operate through three primary dimensions: spiritual awareness, ecological responsibility, and ecological character. These three dimensions consistently emerged across all data sources and formed a systematic pattern of relationships.

The analysis indicates that the process of developing children's ecological character does not begin with the mastery of environmental knowledge, but rather with the formation of theological awareness concerning the relationship between human beings, Allah, and nature. This awareness subsequently develops into conscious ecological actions and is ultimately internalized as a character trait embedded within the child. These findings indicate that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan occurs through three interconnected developmental stages, namely:

Table 4. Construction of the *Iman–Islam–Ihsan* Ecopedagogical Model

Dimension	Pedagogical Function	Empirical Manifestation
<i>Iman</i>	Ecological Awareness	Admiring Allah's creation, expressing gratitude for nature, and understanding nature as <i>ayat kauniyah</i> (signs of God's creation)
<i>Islam</i>	Ecological Responsibility	Planting, caring for plants, conserving water, managing waste, and maintaining cleanliness
<i>Ihsan</i>	Ecological Character	Spontaneous concern for the environment, empathy toward living creatures, and ecological behaviors performed without instruction
Outcome	Sustainable Ecological Lifestyle	Sustainable living habits that become an integral part of the child's identity

6. *Iman* as the Foundation of Ecological Awareness

The first stage of the model is *Iman*, which functions as the foundation for the development of ecological awareness. The research findings indicate that all environmental education activities consistently begin with reinforcing the awareness that nature is Allah's creation and contains signs of His greatness (*ayat kauniyah*).

At this stage, children do not merely acquire knowledge about plants, animals, or the environment, but also develop a sense of wonder, gratitude, and spiritual connectedness with nature. The ecological awareness that develops is not merely scientific awareness, but rather theological awareness that views nature as part of the *amanah* entrusted by Allah.

Thus, *Iman* functions as an ontological foundation that shapes children's worldview and their perception of the environment.

Islam as Ecological Responsibility. The second stage is *Islam*, namely the transformation of ecological awareness into ecological responsibility. At this stage, established beliefs are manifested through concrete actions in everyday life. Field data indicate that students routinely engage in various ecological activities integrated into their daily activities at school. These activities include watering and caring for plants in the school garden, feeding animals, sorting waste according to type, cleaning the learning environment, and developing habits of using water efficiently. Direct involvement in these activities not only helps children understand the importance of environmental conservation but also fosters a sense of responsibility, concern, discipline, and environmentally friendly habits from an early age.

Importantly, these actions are not understood merely as school assignments, but as forms of worship and manifestations of the value of human stewardship as *khalifah fil ardh*. In the developed model, *Islam* functions as a bridge between awareness and action. Ecological awareness that is not translated into action remains at the cognitive level, whereas actions that are not grounded in spiritual awareness tend to be instrumental and unsustainable.

7. *Ihsan* as Ecological Character

The third stage is *Ihsan*, namely the internalization of ecological values so that they develop into ecological character. Field findings indicate that several ecological behaviors have developed into habits that emerge spontaneously without direct guidance from teachers. Children were observed picking up litter, reminding their peers to maintain environmental cleanliness, watering plants that appeared wilted, helping injured small animals, and voluntarily maintaining the cleanliness and sustainability of the school environment. These behaviors demonstrate that environmental care values are not merely understood at the level of knowledge but have been internalized as ecological character reflected in children's concrete everyday actions.

These behaviors indicate that ecological values have become part of the children's moral identity. Children no longer care for the environment merely because of teacher instructions or school rules, but because they perceive environmental stewardship as something good and right to do. From the perspective of Islamic education, this condition represents the dimension of *Ihsan*, namely doing good consciously through an inner disposition and deep spiritual awareness.

8. Sustainable Ecological Lifestyle as the Outcome of Education

Unlike many environmental education models that stop at behavioral change, the findings of this study indicate the existence of a further stage, namely the development of a Sustainable Ecological Lifestyle.

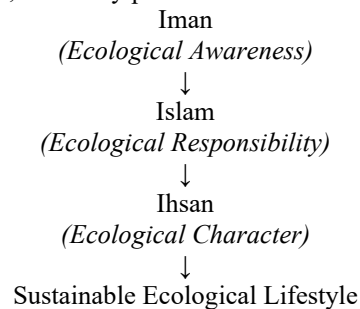
Interview data from parents indicate that various ecological behaviors learned at school have begun to be transferred into the family environment. Children have developed habits of conserving water, watering plants at home, reminding family members to dispose of waste properly, and demonstrating concern for animals and plants

in their surroundings.

These findings indicate that the ecological character developed through the educational process has begun to evolve into a sustainable ecological lifestyle.

The Resulting Conceptual Model

Based on the overall field findings, this study produced the following model:



This model demonstrates that environmental education in early childhood is a transformative process that moves from spiritual awareness to ecological responsibility, develops into ecological character, and ultimately shapes a sustainable lifestyle.

Theoretically, this model makes an important contribution to the development of ecopedagogy. Whereas the ecopedagogical models developed by Freire, Gadotti, Orr, Capra, and Sterling primarily depart from critical ecological consciousness, the model generated by this study demonstrates that the development of ecological awareness can also occur through a spiritual-ecological pathway.

Accordingly, this study extends ecopedagogy theory by adding the dimension of spiritual ecological consciousness, namely an ecological awareness rooted in the transcendental relationship among human beings, nature, and God. This constitutes the primary novelty of the study: the introduction of the Iman–Islam–Ihsan Ecopedagogical Model as a paradigm for environmental education in early childhood education that comprehensively integrates theological, pedagogical, and ecological dimensions.

9. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan Ciamis develops through a process that is oriented not only toward the acquisition of ecological knowledge but also toward the formation of children's spiritual awareness, moral responsibility, and ecological character. These findings demonstrate that environmental issues cannot be understood merely as technical or ecological problems, but also as pedagogical, ethical, and spiritual concerns. Therefore, environmental education requires an approach capable of integrating knowledge, values, and action within a comprehensive educational framework.

The findings of this study are consistent with the ideas of Paulo Freire (1970), who conceptualized education as a process of *conscientization* that enables individuals to understand reality critically and take action to transform it. From Freire's perspective, education that merely functions as the transfer of information will not produce meaningful social change. Education must cultivate awareness that motivates action. The findings of this study demonstrate that environmental education at TK Alam Al-Hasan does not stop at introducing environmental concepts but is directed toward developing ecological awareness that is subsequently manifested in concrete actions to care for the environment.

Nevertheless, the findings also demonstrate that children's ecological awareness does not primarily develop through processes of social critique, as emphasized in Freirean critical pedagogy. Rather, this awareness develops through spiritual experiences that connect children with nature as God's creation. This finding extends the concept of *critical consciousness* toward what may be termed spiritual ecological consciousness, namely ecological awareness rooted in the transcendental relationship among human beings, nature, and God.

This interpretation reinforces the ideas of Moacir Gadotti (2008), who developed the concepts of *planetary citizenship* and *planetary consciousness*. According to Gadotti, the primary aim of ecopedagogy is to develop an awareness that human beings are part of a global community of life and therefore have a responsibility for the sustainability of the Earth. However, the findings of this study indicate that, within the context of Islamic education, such planetary awareness acquires a deeper foundation through religious belief. Children care for the environment not only because they recognize their interconnectedness with the global ecosystem, but also because they believe that the environment is an *amanah* from Allah that must be protected and preserved.

The findings also confirm David Orr's (2004) perspective on the importance of ecological literacy. Orr argues that the environmental crisis is fundamentally a consequence of the failure of educational systems to develop individuals who understand the basic principles underlying the sustainability of life. The findings demonstrate that nature-based learning at TK Alam Al-Hasan successfully develops ecological literacy through direct experiences of gardening, caring for plants, raising animals, and managing the school environment. However, this

study finds that ecological literacy alone is insufficient to explain the emergence of consistent ecological behavior. A more determining factor is the internalization of spiritual values, which provides moral meaning to ecological actions.

From the perspective of Fritjof Capra (Capra & Luisi, 2014), all forms of life exist within an interconnected *web of life* that cannot be separated from one another. The findings demonstrate that children at TK Alam Al-Hasan develop an understanding of this interconnectedness through direct experiences with nature. However, unlike Capra's systemic approach, which is rooted in *deep ecology*, the interconnectedness identified in this study has a theological dimension. The relationship between human beings and nature is understood as part of the relationship between human beings and Allah. Thus, ecological interconnectedness is not merely biological and ecological but also spiritual.

The findings of this study also support Sterling's (2001) concept of transformative education. Sterling emphasizes that sustainability education requires a paradigm shift from education oriented toward knowledge transfer to education capable of transforming learners' perspectives, values, and behaviors. The *Iman–Islam–Ihsan Ecopedagogical Model* identified in this study demonstrates that such transformation occurs through a process of value internalization that moves from awareness to action and ultimately to character. In other words, the success of environmental education should not be measured by the amount of information children know, but by changes in how they perceive and interact with the environment.

On the other hand, the findings provide strong empirical support for Seyyed Hossein Nasr's (Nasr, 1996) critique concerning the spiritual roots of the modern ecological crisis. Nasr argues that environmental degradation is a consequence of the loss of the sacred dimension in humanity's perception of nature. When nature is reduced to an object of economic exploitation, the spiritual relationship between human beings and the environment becomes disconnected. The findings at TK Alam Al-Hasan demonstrate that the process of resacralizing nature can begin through education in early childhood. Children are introduced to nature as *ayat kauniyah*, containing signs of Allah's greatness. Through these experiences, a sense of respect, gratitude, and responsibility toward the environment develops. Thus, environmental education functions as a means of restoring the sacred dimension in the relationship between human beings and nature.

The findings also reinforce the Islamic environmental ethics framework developed by Fazlun Khalid (2019). Khalid emphasizes that the principles of *tawhid*, *khalifah*, *amanah*, and *mizan* constitute fundamental foundations of Islamic ecological ethics. All four principles were clearly manifested in the environmental education practices at TK Alam Al-Hasan. The principle of *tawhid* was manifested through introducing nature as Allah's creation; *khalifah* through the responsibility to protect the environment; *amanah* through habituating children to care for living beings; and *mizan* through learning about ecological balance and the wise use of natural resources. These findings demonstrate that Islamic environmental ethics can be operationalized concretely within the context of early childhood education.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the reinterpretation of the *Iman–Islam–Ihsan* trilogy as an ecological pedagogical framework. Traditionally, the concepts of *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan* have primarily been understood as a theological structure for developing Muslim religiosity. Drawing on the ideas of Nurcholish Madjid (1992), this study demonstrates that the trilogy can also be understood as a developmental framework for ecological awareness. *Iman* functions as the foundation of ecological awareness, *Islam* as the manifestation of ecological responsibility, and *Ihsan* as the expression of ecological character. This reinterpretation expands the pedagogical function of the *Iman–Islam–Ihsan* trilogy from the domain of religious formation into the domain of environmental education.

Conceptually, the resulting model demonstrates that the development of ecological character occurs through a gradual process. Spiritual awareness cultivated through *Iman* stimulates the emergence of ecological responsibility within the dimension of *Islam*. Repeated ecological practices subsequently develop into ecological character within the dimension of *Ihsan*. Once this character has been internalized, it gives rise to a sustainable ecological lifestyle, which represents the ultimate goal of environmental education.

Thus, this study makes an important theoretical contribution to the development of ecopedagogy. Whereas ecopedagogy has traditionally emphasized critical consciousness, ecological literacy, and social sustainability, this study demonstrates that the development of ecological awareness can also occur through a pathway of spirituality. This finding extends the ecopedagogical paradigm toward what may be termed spiritual ecopedagogy, namely an approach to environmental education that integrates ecological awareness, spiritual values, and the development of sustainability-oriented character within a comprehensive pedagogical framework. In the context of early childhood education, this model offers an alternative paradigm that is not only relevant to Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia but also has the potential to contribute to the development of values-based sustainability education across diverse religious communities worldwide.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that environmental education in early childhood can be more comprehensively

reinterpreted through the framework of *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan*. The findings from TK Alam Al-Hasan Ciamis indicate that environmental education functions not only as a means of developing environmental knowledge and environmentally responsible behaviors but also as a process of cultivating spiritual-ecological awareness integrated with Islamic values. The implementation of environmental education is carried out holistically through nature-based learning, ecological habituation, and the internalization of Islamic ecological values, which are embedded within the school culture and daily learning activities.

This study found that the development of children's ecological awareness occurs through three interconnected stages. First, *Iman* functions as the foundation of ecological awareness, namely the awareness that nature is Allah's creation, possesses intrinsic value, and should be respected. Second, *Islam* functions as ecological responsibility, namely the actualization of this awareness through ecological responsibility manifested in various environmental stewardship practices. Third, *Ihsan* functions as ecological character, namely the internalization of ecological values so that they develop into character and habits practiced voluntarily without external supervision. These three stages constitute a transformative process that progresses from awareness to action and ultimately to character.

Based on these empirical findings, this study formulated the Iman–Islam–Ihsan Ecopedagogical Model, which demonstrates that environmental education in early childhood develops through the following pathway: Iman (Ecological Awareness) → Islam (Ecological Responsibility) → Ihsan (Ecological Character) → Sustainable Ecological Lifestyle. This model demonstrates that the ultimate goal of environmental education does not stop at improving ecological literacy but extends toward the development of a sustainable ecological lifestyle rooted in spiritual awareness and moral character.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of ecopedagogy by expanding a paradigm that has traditionally been dominated by critical and socially oriented sustainability approaches toward a spiritual-ecological dimension. While Freire, Gadotti, Orr, Capra, and Sterling emphasize the importance of critical consciousness, ecological literacy, and sustainability-oriented transformation, this study demonstrates that ecological awareness can also be cultivated through a theological foundation that connects the relationships among God, human beings, and nature. Accordingly, this study offers a new perspective in the form of spiritual ecological consciousness, namely ecological awareness rooted in faith-based values that serves as the foundation for the development of sustainability-oriented character.

Practically, the findings of this study have implications for the development of environmental education in early childhood settings, particularly within Islamic educational institutions. Integrating the values of *Iman*, *Islam*, and *Ihsan* into nature-based learning can serve as an effective strategy for developing a generation that simultaneously demonstrates environmental concern, social responsibility, and religious character. The resulting model also has the potential to serve as a conceptual framework for developing values-based environmental education curricula across diverse Islamic educational contexts.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations because it was conducted at a single research site with distinctive characteristics as an Islamic nature-based school. Therefore, future research should test and further develop the Iman–Islam–Ihsan Ecopedagogical Model across diverse educational contexts, geographical regions, and educational levels. Further research is also needed to investigate the effectiveness of this model in fostering long-term ecological behaviors and its contribution to the development of spirituality-based sustainability education within a global context.

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