

# When the Teacher Becomes the Curriculum: Relational, Institutional, and Ecological Determinants of Islamic Character Formation in an Indonesian Madrasah Tsanawiyah

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## ABSTRACT:

This study examines how Aqidah Akhlak instruction functions as a character formation system in an Indonesian madrasah tsanawiyah, focusing on the relational, institutional, and ecological factors shaping students' moral internalisation. Existing research in Islamic education has largely emphasised curriculum design and pedagogy while underexamining teacher moral exemplarity, institutional religious culture, and the coherence between school values and students' external social environments. Using a qualitative instrumental case study design, data were collected at MTs Miftahussalam, Tangerang, Indonesia, through semi-structured interviews with seven participants, ten non-participant observations, and documentary analysis conducted across two fieldwork phases (October 2024 and March 2025). Thematic analysis identified four major findings. First, students consistently viewed the Aqidah Akhlak teacher's personal religious conduct, rather than lesson content, as the primary influence on behavioural change. Second, structured non-formal religious activities positioned students as active moral agents through rotating leadership roles. Third, a multidimensional assessment system integrated character evaluation into the formal grading structure. Fourth, competing social influences outside school emerged as the programme's strongest structural constraint. Drawing on Lickona's character education theory, Bourdieu's

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habitus concept, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework, the study proposes a relational-ecological model of Islamic character formation. The model conceptualises teacher personhood, institutional ritual density, and ecological coherence as interdependent determinants of character formation outcomes, with implications for teacher preparation, madrasah governance, and educational support systems in Muslim-majority contexts.

Keywords: Islamic character formation, teacher moral exemplarity, madrasah, ecological coherence, Aqidah Akhlak.

## 1. Introduction

Across diverse human service contexts including formal education, community development, and institutional welfare systems the challenge of translating normative values into durable behavioural change among service recipients represents a persistent structural problem. Within Islamic educational systems, this challenge manifests most visibly in the documented gap between formal religious instruction and genuine moral internalisation among adolescent students. This gap is not merely a pedagogical concern; it constitutes a broader human services failure, insofar as the madrasah institution is tasked with producing morally competent individuals capable of meaningful social participation and community contribution. Understanding the relational, institutional, and ecological mechanisms that determine whether this formation succeeds or fails is therefore a matter of direct relevance to human services research, policy, and practice.

Islamic schools throughout the Muslim world have invested substantially in religious character curricula, yet empirical evidence consistently documents a disjunction between institutional

intent and student behavioural outcomes. Moral development, unlike cognitive learning, is not reducible to information transfer; it operates through internal consciousness, interpersonal relationships, and the quality of the social environments students inhabit across the full arc of their daily lives<sup>1,2</sup>). Pedagogical approaches that integrate values through reflective, humanistic, and cooperative modalities have demonstrated stronger internalization outcomes than didactic content delivery alone<sup>3,4</sup>), yet socio-cultural pressures and the competing pull of digital modernity continuously mediate how students receive and retain religious instruction<sup>5,6</sup>). Parental reinforcement and community norms further shape value adoption in ways that extend well beyond the institutional boundary<sup>7</sup>), while curriculum inconsistencies weaken the structural conditions under which moral formation can take hold<sup>8</sup>). The problem is, in structural terms, multi-causal and irreducible to any single institutional variable.

Indonesia constitutes a particularly consequential site for examining this problem at scale. As the country with the world's largest

Muslim population, it operates more than 86,000 madrasahs, serving approximately 10.4 million students, with *Aqidah Akhlak* a subject that integrates Islamic theological belief with moral conduct mandated across all Islamic educational levels<sup>9</sup>). The madrasah system's historical trajectory reflects successive attempts to reconcile traditional Islamic learning with modern national education frameworks<sup>10,11</sup>). Despite this sustained institutional investment, empirical studies persistently document troubling behavioural patterns among students, including bullying, academic dishonesty, and eroding religious commitment<sup>12,13</sup>). These patterns are compounded by uneven curriculum implementation, variable teacher quality, and socio-economic resource constraints affecting educational delivery across the archipelago<sup>14,15</sup>). The gap between what the madrasah system formally intends and what students actually internalize is therefore structurally produced rather than incidentally occurring.

The formal basis for Indonesia's Islamic education system is Law No. 20 of 2003, which positions the cultivation of faith, moral integrity, and noble character as central national education objectives. *Aqidah Akhlak* operationalises these objectives by linking Islamic creedal principles to observable moral behaviour in daily life<sup>16,17</sup>), covering foundational doctrines alongside Qur'anic and Hadith-based ethical guidance for personal and social conduct. Empirical studies confirm the subject's measurable contribution to moral development when supported by reflective, value-oriented pedagogy<sup>18,19</sup>), yet teacher capacity gaps and implementation inconsistencies continue to limit its transformative reach. The curriculum's internal logic renders this constraint especially

consequential: *akhlak karimah* is not conceived as a body of knowledge to be transmitted but as a set of dispositions to be embodied, with the Prophet Muhammad positioned as the ultimate moral exemplar. Teachers are not expected merely to explain values but to enact them visibly in their daily conduct, functioning as living pedagogical instruments whose personal behaviour directly conditions student moral formation<sup>20,21</sup>). When teachers cannot or do not fulfil this function, the curriculum's foundational logic is disrupted at its most critical point.

The madrasah tsanawiyah level is particularly critical within this system because early adolescence constitutes the developmental period in which religious identity, moral reasoning, and behavioural dispositions are most actively formed and most vulnerable to competing social influences<sup>22,23</sup>). Students at this stage confront escalating peer pressure, sustained exposure to digital environments, and recurrent normative tensions between familial religious expectations and the social norms of broader youth culture. The MTs institution is therefore positioned at the intersection of maximum developmental opportunity and maximum ecological risk, making it the stage at which the quality of character formation inputs carries the greatest consequence and at which their absence is most damaging<sup>24</sup>). From a human services perspective, this vulnerability warrants sustained analytical attention, yet existing scholarship has not adequately addressed the structural conditions that govern whether school-based moral formation efforts at this level achieve their intended outcomes.

The research literature on *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction has expanded substantially since the

early 2000s but remains constrained by two persistent limitations. Methodologically, the field relies heavily on quasi-experimental designs and self-report instruments that reduce moral formation to quantifiable attitude scores, bypassing the social and relational processes through which character actually develops in institutional settings<sup>25,26</sup>. Theoretically, existing accounts treat teacher quality as a matter of pedagogical competence rather than embodied moral authority, evaluate school programmes by their structural presence rather than their internalization depth, and leave largely unexamined the tensions between school-based moral environments and the extra-institutional social worlds students inhabit daily<sup>27</sup>. Comparative research from Muslim-majority contexts reinforces the scale of this gap: studies conducted in Malaysia find that school climate and teacher-student relational quality predict moral outcomes more strongly than curriculum content<sup>20</sup>, while ethnographic research on Indonesian pesantren demonstrates that ecological coherence across students' daily environments is a primary condition for deep moral internalization a condition structurally absent in most day-school contexts<sup>28</sup>. More recent cross-national comparisons further confirm that pedagogical approach, cultural integration, and institutional governance together shape religious identity formation across Muslim societies in ways no single-variable analysis can adequately capture<sup>29</sup>. What the field lacks is an integrative framework that simultaneously theorises the interpersonal, institutional, and ecological dimensions of Islamic character formation.

Recent scholarship within the human services and educational welfare literature has begun to

address adjacent dimensions of this problem. Research on adolescent support systems has demonstrated that the relational quality of institutional environments including schools, youth organisations, and community programmes constitutes a primary determinant of sustained behavioural change among young people navigating competing socialisation pressures<sup>30</sup>. Studies examining teacher well-being and its relationship to student moral and social outcomes have established that the personal values, relational dispositions, and emotional consistency of front-line educational workers constitute a form of human capital that institutional policy has historically undervalued<sup>31</sup>. Community-based approaches to adolescent character development, drawing on ecological systems perspectives, have similarly found that programme effectiveness is substantially moderated by the degree of normative coherence across the multiple environments young people inhabit schools, families, peer networks, and community institutions<sup>32,33</sup>. These converging lines of evidence suggest that the structural challenges facing Islamic character formation in the Indonesian madrasah context are not unique to that system but reflect a broader set of human services dynamics amenable to analysis through an integrated relational-ecological lens.

This study addresses the identified theoretical and methodological gap through a qualitative instrumental case study of *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction at MTs Miftahussalam, Tangerang, Indonesia. Three research questions guide the inquiry: how formal and non-formal instructional practices function together as a character formation system; through what relational and

institutional mechanisms teacher moral exemplarity and students' ritual roles mediate character outcomes; and what structural factors, particularly extra-institutional ecological pressures, constrain the programme's capacity to produce durable religious character. To analyse these questions, the study draws on Lickona's (1991) character education theory at the interpersonal level, Bourdieu's (1977) habitus concept at the institutional level, and Bronfenbrenner's (2007) ecological systems theory at the structural level<sup>1,30,34</sup>. The synthesis of these three frameworks is developed through the findings into a relational-ecological model of Islamic character formation, the study's primary theoretical contribution, which reconceptualises teacher personhood, institutional ritual density, and ecological coherence as three interdependent determinants of character formation outcomes in Islamic day-school contexts. The model carries direct implications for teacher preparation policy, madrasah governance, and the design of human support systems in Muslim-majority educational settings.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative instrumental case study design<sup>35,36</sup>. An instrumental rather than intrinsic orientation was adopted because the research questions do not treat MTs Miftahussalam as a phenomenon of interest in itself but as a bounded instance through which to develop transferable theoretical understanding of how *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction operates as a character formation system in Islamic day-school contexts. Consistent with an interpretivist epistemological commitment to contextually grounded explanation, findings are understood as analytically transferable

rather than statistically generalisable<sup>37</sup>. This epistemological stance reflects a wider recognition within qualitative human services research that practice-relevant, contextually embedded knowledge is indispensable for understanding the relational and institutional mechanisms through which support systems produce or fail to produce meaningful outcomes for their recipients<sup>38,39</sup>.

### 2.1 Research Site and Participant Selection

MTs Miftahussalam, Karawaci, Tangerang, Banten Province, Indonesia, was selected through purposive criterion sampling on three grounds: a theoretically generative tension between the school's stated character formation goals and observable student conduct gaps documented during preliminary fieldwork in October 2024; an *Aqidah Akhlak* teacher with sufficient institutional tenure to have established a discernible instructional culture; and secured multi-level access across classroom, school leadership, and student body<sup>40</sup>. These criteria were applied to ensure that the case would yield substantively rich data across the three analytical dimensions relational, institutional, and ecological that the study's theoretical framework requires.

Seven participants were recruited across three tiers: headteacher ( $n = 1$ ), teaching staff ( $n = 2$ ), and students drawn from all three grade levels ( $n = 4$ ). Student participants were selected to represent varying levels of character formation engagement as assessed through teacher nomination and October 2024 observation records, ensuring a realistic rather than best-case distribution of programme effects across the student population. Seven participants were judged sufficient for the depth of engagement the instrumental case study

design requires, where analytical adequacy rather than numerical saturation governs sample size decisions<sup>35</sup>). This sampling approach is consistent with current qualitative research standards in human services and educational welfare research, which emphasise theoretical purposiveness and multi-perspective triangulation over large sample representativeness<sup>41</sup>).

## 2.2 Data Collection

Data were collected across two fieldwork phases: a preliminary phase in October 2024 and a primary phase from 11 to 18 March 2025. The two-phase structure was analytically deliberate: October 2024 observation provided baseline documentation of specific student conduct gaps against which March 2025 data collected after the school's non-formal programme had been operating for a full semester could be systematically compared. Three concurrent methods were employed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with all seven participants using differentiated, participant-appropriate guides. Interviews lasted 40 to 65 minutes for adult participants and 20 to 35 minutes for students. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Ten non-participant observation episodes were distributed across five setting types, guided by a structured protocol organised around four analytical dimensions: instructional method, teacher moral conduct, student behavioural indicators, and institutional structural factors. Field notes and interpretive commentary were recorded in separate columns to preserve evidentiary integrity between empirical description and analytical inference. Documentary

analysis treated seven source types including lesson plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran*), character assessment rubrics, student self-reflection records, and teacher-parent communication logs as primary data rather than supplementary corroboration<sup>42</sup>). This multi-method approach is consistent with best practice in qualitative case study research within human services contexts, where triangulation across participant categories, methods, and documentary sources is recognised as essential for producing credible, layered accounts of complex institutional processes.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework within Miles et al.'s (2014) three-stage case study model of data condensation, display, and conclusion-drawing. Initial coding was conducted deductively from the three theoretical frameworks and extended inductively through line-by-line reading of interview transcripts<sup>43,44</sup>). Relational trust emerged as a recurring inductive category across student accounts and was subsequently elevated to a primary analytical theme. Codes were reviewed across two iterative cycles before consolidation into four confirmed themes, consistent across all data sources: curricular planning; instructional practices; character assessment; and observed impacts alongside structural enabling and constraining factors. No finding was reported without corroboration from at least two independent sources. This analytic approach mirrors procedures increasingly adopted in qualitative educational human services research to manage the tension between theoretical coherence and genuine openness to participant-generated meaning.



## 2.4 Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was established through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria. Credibility was supported by source triangulation across three participant categories, method triangulation across all three data collection instruments, and prolonged engagement across two fieldwork phases. One instance of negative case analysis is noted: early coding suggested uniform positive character outcomes, but re-examination of October 2024 observation data revealed persistent conduct counter-indicators that were retained as disconfirming evidence and reported in the results section. Transferability was supported through thick contextual description of the research site. Dependability was maintained through a systematic audit trail of dated field notes, verified transcripts, and a structured coding log. Confirmability was addressed through a reflexive journal in which the researcher's practitioner background within Indonesian Islamic education a simultaneous source of interpretive access and potential confirmatory bias was documented across both fieldwork phases and reviewed at each analytical cycle.

All adult participants provided written informed consent; parental consent and student verbal assent were obtained for all student participants. The school is identified by name with the headteacher's explicit written permission. These procedures are consistent with the ethical standards governing qualitative research with adolescent participants in educational and community human services contexts<sup>45</sup>).

## 3. Results

The findings were derived from triangulated data

collected across two phases of fieldwork, consisting of six classroom observation sessions conducted in October 2024 and March 2025, semi-structured interviews with seven participants, and documentary analysis of seven categories of institutional documents, including lesson plans, character assessment rubrics, student self-reflection records, and teacher–parent communication logs. The data were organised into four thematic areas that emerged through a combined deductive–inductive analytical process: curricular planning and its integration with institutional character goals; formal classroom and non-formal instructional practices; the character assessment system; and observed impacts on students' religious conduct alongside enabling and constraining structural factors. Each finding was supported by participant quotations, field observation notes, and documentary evidence triangulated across at least two independent sources. Collectively, the four thematic areas correspond to the three dimensions of the relational–ecological model: relational, institutional, and ecological, developed in the Discussion section, and together address the three research questions guiding this study.

### 3.1 Curricular Planning: Integrating the Formal Syllabus with Institutional Character Goals

Documentary analysis of the *Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran* (RPP) revealed a systematic adaptation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kementerian Agama; Kemenag) curriculum framework to foreground character formation rather than content coverage alone. Lesson objectives in the sampled RPP documents specified affective and behavioural outcomes

alongside cognitive competencies, with indicators requiring students to demonstrate honesty, self-discipline (disiplin), and social responsibility (tanggung jawab) within observable school contexts. This alignment between formal lesson documentation and character-specific behavioural indicators distinguished the planning process from routine curriculum compliance and reflected an institutional commitment to outcomes extending beyond cognitive knowledge acquisition a distinction of particular relevance to human services education, where translating formal programming into sustained behavioural change remains one of the most persistent implementation challenges<sup>2</sup>.

The headteacher articulated the school's two-tier planning logic during an interview conducted on 12 March 2025:

*"At the beginning of every semester, we prepare the RPP based on the Kemenag curriculum, but we also adapt it to align with the school programme and the character needs of*

*our students."* Ahmad Judin, M.Ag, Headteacher, Interview, 12 March 2025

This statement, corroborated by the school's institutional vision "*Unggul dalam Mutu, Berpijak pada Iman dan Taqwa*" ("Excellence in Quality, Grounded in Faith and Piety") as stated in the official school profile, indicates that national curriculum compliance functioned as a structural baseline, while an internally developed character-oriented framework operated as the school's primary instructional priority. Field observations of a teacher planning meeting conducted on 12 March 2025 further documented a structured collegial forum (*musyawarah*) in which the *Aqidah Akhlak* teacher presented proposed instructional strategies for peer review. This process functioned as an institutional accountability mechanism intended to maintain value-based educational coherence across instructional practices. Table 1 summarises student enrolment across the three grade levels represented in the study.

Table 1. Student enrolment at MTs Miftahussalam Tangerang, Academic Year 2024/2025

| Grade Level | Male (n) | Female (n) | Total (n) |
|-------------|----------|------------|-----------|
| Class VII   | 17       | 9          | 26        |
| Class VIII  | 22       | 11         | 33        |
| Class IX    | 23       | 13         | 36        |
| Total       | 62       | 33         | 95        |

### 3.2 Instructional Practices: Formal Classroom and Structured Non-Formal Activities

#### 3.2.1 Classroom Pedagogical Approaches

Classroom observation across six sessions documented a multi-method instructional approach that departed meaningfully from purely lecture-based delivery. While didactic explanation

(*ceramah*) provided a content baseline, the teacher consistently incorporated moral case-study discussions, small-group role-play simulations, and reflective project assignments within single lesson periods. In one observed session on 12 March 2025, the teacher presented a scenario involving honesty under peer pressure and tasked student groups with deliberating on the appropriate moral



response before presenting their reasoning to the class. This structure required students to articulate, defend, and examine moral positions rather than passively receive them, an approach consistent with evidence-based character education practice demonstrating that active moral reasoning produces stronger value internalisation than passive instruction alone.

The teacher explained the rationale for this approach during a post-observation interview:

*"We do not only teach theory. We guide students to practise moral values in real situations. When students help each other, when they are honest during examinations, we acknowledge and appreciate that."* Udin Syafrudin, S.Pd, *Aqidah Akhlak* Teacher, Interview, 12 March 2025

Classroom observation also documented the teacher's consistent use of prophetic narrative (*sirah nabawiyah*) as a primary vehicle for affective engagement. Rather than presenting ethical principles as abstract doctrinal statements, the teacher narrated specific episodes from the Prophet's conduct and invited students to identify their contemporary application in school and home situations. One student reflected on this approach:

*"I enjoy the Aqidah lesson because the teacher always tells stories about the Prophet's character and we are asked to follow his example."* Oktarina, Student (Class VIII),

Interview, 13 March 2025

This account indicates that prophetic narrative produced an affective orientation toward moral emulation rather than mere cognitive retention of doctrinal content a distinction consistent with the Islamic pedagogical tradition of *qudwah* (exemplary conduct as living curriculum) and with broader human services literature demonstrating that narrative and relational approaches to value transmission produce deeper and more durable behavioural outcomes than declarative instruction<sup>46</sup>.

### 3.2.2 Structured Non-Formal Religious Activities

Beyond formal classroom instruction, the school operated a coordinated set of structured non-formal activities functioning as a daily institutional extension of the *Aqidah Akhlak* curriculum. Field observation and documentary review confirmed that these activities were organisationally planned, timetabled, and supervised primarily by the *Aqidah Akhlak* teacher, reflecting a deliberate institutional decision to embed character formation throughout the school day rather than confining it to a designated curriculum slot. Table 2 summarises the activities, their frequency, and their character formation objectives as documented in school records.

Table 2. Structured non-formal religious activities at MTs Miftahussalam and their character formation objectives

| Activity                      | Frequency       | Location  | Primary Character Objective           |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|---------------------------------------|
| Asma'ul Husna recitation      | Daily (morning) | Classroom | God-consciousness (taqwa), discipline |
| Short religious talk (kultum) | Daily (morning) | Classroom | Public moral expression, leadership   |

|                                  |                  |                |                                           |
|----------------------------------|------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Dhuha congregational prayer      | Daily            | School mosque  | Piety, collective discipline, punctuality |
| Dhuhur congregational prayer     | Daily            | School mosque  | Piety, communal solidarity                |
| Jumat Berkah programme           | Weekly (Friday)  | School grounds | Social care, generosity, empathy          |
| Student imam/muezzin rotation    | Daily (rotating) | School mosque  | Moral agency, responsibility, leadership  |
| Majelis taklim student preaching | Monthly          | School hall    | Religious articulation, moral confidence  |
| Social service (bakti sosial)    | Termly           | Community      | Empathy, social responsibility            |

The student imam and muezzin rotation programme warrants particular attention. Documentary records confirmed that this programme assigned students including those who had previously displayed low religious engagement to leadership roles in congregational prayer on a rotating basis. Field observation on 14 March 2025 recorded students leading Dhuha prayer with visible composure before a full congregation of peers and teachers. This structure positioned students not as passive recipients of moral instruction but as active moral agents bearing genuine public responsibility to a community a role configuration with significant implications for internalisation depth. From a human services perspective, this design parallels evidence-based youth development interventions demonstrating that assigning authentic community roles to young people rather than simulating participation produces substantially stronger identity-based behavioural change<sup>47</sup>.

### 3.3 Character Assessment: A Multi-Dimensional Evaluation System

Documentary analysis revealed that the *Aqidah Akhlak* assessment system extended substantially beyond written examinations. A formal character assessment rubric maintained by the teacher and reviewed by the headteacher at regular intervals operationalised five behavioural dimensions: honesty (jujur), trustworthiness (amanah), patience (sabar), discipline (disiplin), and care for others (peduli). The assessment system functioned through three interconnected mechanisms that together constituted a continuous formative feedback structure aligned with best practice in educational human services assessment<sup>48</sup>.

First, the teacher maintained a daily character observation journal recording specific student behaviours against the five rubric dimensions, including on-time attendance, voluntary participation in religious activities, and respectful conduct toward staff. Second, students completed weekly written moral self-reflections (*refleksi*

*akhlak*) evaluating their own conduct against Islamic ethical criteria, cultivating metacognitive awareness of the gap between personal behaviour and aspired values. Third, the teacher provided immediate verbal positive reinforcement during classroom sessions when students demonstrated target values in real time. The headteacher described the institutional philosophy underpinning this arrangement:

*"We emphasise to every teacher that Aqidah Akhlak assessment must not be limited to written tests alone. It must include daily observation and the cultivation of positive habits throughout the school environment."* Ahmad Judin, M.Ag, Headteacher, Interview, 12 March 2025

Interview data with the teacher (14 March 2025) confirmed that the character journal contributed to the student's formal report card grade for *Aqidah Akhlak* alongside written test scores. This institutional weighting of observed behaviour within the formal grading system constitutes a structural commitment to affective outcomes that extends beyond rhetorical declaration, signalling to students, families, and the wider school community that moral conduct is assessed with equal seriousness as academic knowledge a structural alignment that human services research identifies as essential for sustaining institutional character formation initiatives over time<sup>49</sup>).

### 3.4 Observed Impacts, Enabling Factors, and Structural Constraints

#### 3.4.1 Observable Changes in Student Religious Conduct

Cross-source triangulation identified several areas in which student conduct aligned with the religious character values targeted by the programme. Student accounts described specific

behavioural changes attributed directly to the instructional and institutional environment. Zahro (Class IX) articulated a shift in both religious practice and moral motivation:

*"I have become more motivated to pray and I dislike dishonesty, because I feel a sense of shame before the Aqidah teacher."* Zahro, Student (Class IX), Interview, 11 March 2025

This account is analytically significant: the motivational force identified was not doctrinal conviction but the relational presence of the teacher as a personal moral reference point. A second student, Tio Permana Putra (Interview, 18 March 2025), cited the teacher's consistent punctuality and regular attendance as the specific behaviours that shaped his own sense of discipline. These accounts arose independently across separate interview sessions without researcher prompting, lending considerable evidentiary weight to the inference that teacher conduct operated as a primary behavioural model — in parallel with, and in several accounts more powerfully than, formal lesson content. This pattern is consistent with social learning theory's core proposition that the behavioural modelling effects of valued institutional figures constitute a primary vector of dispositional change in adolescent populations.

Field observation at the school mosque on 11 and 14 March 2025 corroborated these interview accounts. Students participated in Dhuha prayer and post-prayer group dhikr with sustained attentiveness and minimal disruption. Documentary records confirmed that several students had voluntarily assumed regular imam and muezzin roles beyond their assigned rotation and

that a subset had delivered religious talks in the school's monthly majelis taklim without staff prompting. The *Aqidah Akhlak* teacher observed broader interpersonal shifts:

*"Students now greet each other more often, they do not mock one another, and they show more respect toward their teachers. These values are not only taught — they are practised in social service, in religious gatherings, and in individual mentoring."* Udin Syafrudin, S.Pd, *Aqidah Akhlak* Teacher, Interview, 13 March 2025

These positive developments must, however, be qualified by counter-indicators documented during October 2024 fieldwork. Specific instances were recorded of students failing to use the Islamic greeting when encountering teachers, speaking during instructional time, and wearing school uniforms inconsistently with school regulations. These observations confirm that character formation outcomes were uneven across the student population and had not produced uniform behavioural change at the time of primary data collection a pattern familiar in human services evaluation literature, where programme reach and depth of impact consistently vary across participant subgroups as a function of baseline engagement, home environment, and relational proximity to key practitioners<sup>50,51</sup>.

### **3.4.2 Enabling Factors**

Three enabling factors recurred consistently across independent data sources. Teacher commitment was the most frequently cited: headteacher and student participants independently described the *Aqidah Akhlak* teacher's personal conduct his punctuality, emotional consistency, participation in congregational prayer, and relational warmth

toward students as the primary driver of positive character formation outcomes. This recurrence across participant categories, arising without researcher prompting, indicates salience beyond interview framing effects and points to teacher personhood as a structural resource for the programme rather than merely a background condition. This finding resonates with human services research demonstrating that the relational quality of front-line practitioners constitutes the strongest predictor of client engagement and sustained behavioural change across a range of institutional settings.

Institutional leadership alignment constituted a second enabling condition: the headteacher's explicit integration of religious character formation into strategic priorities evidenced in the school vision statement, formal character rubric, and structured non-formal activities programme provided an enabling institutional architecture that prevented the *Aqidah Akhlak* programme from operating in programmatic isolation. Partial parental reinforcement functioned as a third enabling factor: documentary review of teacher-parent communication records and informal interview data indicated that a subset of families actively reinforced Qur'anic memorisation tasks and character reflection assignments at home, amplifying the school programme's reach beyond the school gate, though this involvement was not uniform across the parent community.

### **3.4.3 Structural Constraints**

Three structural constraints limited programme impact and were reported consistently by teaching staff. Curriculum time scarcity was the most immediate: both teacher and headteacher identified

the insufficient formal timetable allocation for the extended reflective engagement that deep character formation requires. *Aqidah Akhlak* occupied a standard curriculum slot competing with content coverage demands that left limited space for the individual moral mentoring the teacher considered most effective a structural condition that Berkowitz and Bier (2005) identify as among the most common implementation barriers in character education programming globally.

Extra-institutional social environment pressures presented a qualitatively different challenge. A senior teacher described the constraint:

*""Several students show low discipline because of the influence of their peer social environments outside school, environments that do not support religious character formation.""* H.M. Yasin, S.Pd, Senior Teacher, Interview, 17 March 2025

This observation points to a structural asymmetry that is well-documented in ecological approaches to adolescent development: the school's character formation environment is

bounded by the school day, while competing socialisation influences external peer networks, digital media environments, and community norms operate continuously and without the structured intentionality of the institutional programme<sup>52</sup>). Students whose out-of-school environments normalised conduct inconsistent with the school's religious values faced a daily negotiation between two social logics, a tension that no improvement in classroom instruction alone can resolve.

Physical resource limitations constituted a third constraint. With a built area of 698 m<sup>2</sup> across a site of 1,230 m<sup>2</sup>, the school lacked a dedicated mentoring space or character education facility, limiting the small-group intensive formats the teacher regarded as optimal for individual character development. The absence of character-specific educational media was similarly noted as a practical constraint on instructional variety, consistent with wider findings on the role of resource adequacy in determining programme fidelity in under-resourced educational human services contexts<sup>51</sup>).

Table 3. Summary of findings across four thematic areas

| Thematic Area           | Key Findings                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Primary Data Source                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Curricular Planning     | RPP integrates Kemenag framework with character-specific behavioural indicators; collegial planning forum (musyawarah) provides peer accountability; school vision explicitly foregrounds iman and taqwa as operational priority | Documentary analysis (RPP, school profile); headteacher interview (12 March 2025); field observation (teacher meeting) |
| Instructional Practices | Multi-method classroom pedagogy (case-study, role-play, prophetic narrative via sirah nabawiyah); structured non-formal programme positions students as active moral agents through rotating leadership roles                    | Classroom observation (6 sessions); teacher and student interviews; activity documentation                             |

|                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Character Assessment           | Five-dimension rubric (jujur, amanah, sabar, disiplin, peduli); daily character observation journal; weekly student self-reflection; positive reinforcement in real time; character grades integrated into formal report card                                                                        | Documentary analysis (rubric, journal); teacher interview (14 March 2025); classroom observation                                        |
| Impacts, Enablers, Constraints | Observable shifts in prayer conduct, honesty, and interpersonal respect; teacher moral exemplarity identified as primary mechanism across independent accounts; time scarcity and extra-institutional peer environments as primary structural constraints; parental reinforcement present but uneven | Student, teacher, headteacher interviews; mosque observation (11 & 14 March 2025); documentary records; October 2024 counter-indicators |

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study speak directly to the theoretical gap identified in the Introduction: the absence of an integrative framework that simultaneously addresses the interpersonal, institutional, and ecological dimensions of Islamic character formation in day-school contexts. Existing scholarship reviewed in the Introduction including quasi-experimental studies of *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction that reduced moral formation to quantifiable attitude scores<sup>25,26</sup>, behavioural surveys documenting erosion of religious conduct among madrasah students<sup>12,13</sup>, and comparative analyses establishing school climate and teacher-student relational quality as stronger predictors of moral outcomes than curriculum content<sup>20</sup> consistently treated curriculum design and pedagogical method as the primary levers of character outcome, while leaving underexamined the role of teacher moral exemplarity, institutional ritual architecture, and the structural tension

between the school's moral environment and students' extra-institutional social worlds<sup>27</sup>. The present findings do not refute the significance of curriculum and method; they reposition these factors as necessary but insufficient conditions, whose effectiveness is substantially mediated by forces operating at relational, institutional, and ecological levels simultaneously.

The most consistently recurring finding across independent data sources student interviews, teacher accounts, and field observation was that character formation outcomes were attributed to the visible daily conduct of the *Aqidah Akhlak* teacher rather than to specific lesson content. Students who reported shifts in prayer practice, reduced dishonesty, and improved interpersonal conduct each independently located the cause in the teacher's personal religious behaviour: his punctuality, emotional consistency, communal prayer participation, and relational warmth toward the school community. These accounts arose



without researcher prompting across separate interview sessions, which substantially strengthens their evidentiary status. This result both confirms and extends Tamuri's (2007) analysis of teacher moral authority in Islamic secondary education cited in the Introduction as a foundational comparative reference and directly challenges the curriculum-centred accounts that dominate the Indonesian *Aqidah Akhlak* literature<sup>18,19</sup>. In Lickona's (1991) tripartite framework one of three theoretical pillars established in the Introduction teachers are positioned as instructional agents who cultivate moral knowing and stimulate moral feeling through deliberate pedagogical choices<sup>1</sup>. The present data suggest a more fundamental function: in an Islamic pedagogical tradition grounded in *uswah hasanah* (exemplary personal conduct as the primary vehicle of moral transmission), the teacher does not merely facilitate moral knowing but constitutes the moral content itself<sup>20,21</sup>. This ontological role theorised through Bourdieu's (1977) habitus concept introduced in the Introduction means that students internalise moral dispositions through sustained immersion in the teacher's embodied field presence, a process operating largely below the level of conscious deliberation<sup>34</sup>. This accounts for the striking pattern in the data: students articulated changes in their behaviour but located their cause in the teacher's person rather than in any lesson they could recall. If Islamic character formation operates primarily through teacher personhood rather than curriculum delivery, the persistent implementation gap documented across the Indonesian madrasah literature through Marzuki (2017) and Zubaedi (2011) is partly a product of pre-service preparation frameworks that invest

primarily in content mastery and pedagogical technique while treating personal religious character as a background assumption a misalignment with direct policy implications for *Aqidah Akhlak* teacher recruitment and professional development<sup>13,53</sup>.

The second mechanism through which character formation operated in this study was the school's structured non-formal activities programme, whose significance can be fully appreciated only when read against the theoretical framework assembled in the Introduction. The Introduction established that existing research tends to evaluate school programmes by their structural presence rather than by the internalisation depth they produce<sup>27</sup>. The present findings reveal a more consequential distinction: between activities that position students as passive recipients of moral instruction and those that assign them genuine moral agency within a public institutional community. At MTs Miftahussalam, the rotating student imam, muezzin, and majelis taklim preacher programme did not require students to simulate moral responsibility; it required them to exercise it before a live congregation. Documentary records confirmed that students who had previously displayed low religious engagement voluntarily assumed regular leadership roles beyond their assigned rotation a pattern that cannot be explained by intrinsic motivation alone and points instead to the identity-constituting effects of occupying a public moral role. This is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) proposition introduced in the Introduction as the ecological pillar of the study's framework that developmental outcomes are strongest when young people occupy proximal roles that demand genuine

agency rather than simulated participation. The coexistence of these positive indicators, however, with the persistent counter-indicators documented in the two-phase fieldwork design described in the Methodology students failing to greet teachers, speaking during instruction, and wearing uniforms inconsistently in October 2024 confirms that the mechanism did not produce uniform outcomes across the student population. Not all students who participated in the activities crossed the threshold from compliance to genuine moral commitment. The conditions governing this transition for which students, under which relational and ecological circumstances remain the most important unresolved question the relational-ecological model raises, and constitute the primary direction for longitudinal follow-up research.

The third and most structurally significant mechanism concerns the ecological dimension, which the Introduction established as the most theoretically underdeveloped area in the existing literature. The findings confirm Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework's analytical necessity and extend it empirically. The school's structured religious culture daily communal prayer, Asma'ul Husna recitation, and the Jumat Berkah social service programme constituted a coherent moral microsystem within the school boundary. Yet the senior teacher's independent account of persistent student indiscipline attributable to social environments outside school that did not support religious character formation, corroborated by October 2024 observations of specific conduct failures, documents a structural asymmetry that no improvement in instructional quality can resolve alone. This is precisely the ecological dynamic that distinguishes day-school character formation from

the pesantren context discussed comparatively in the Introduction<sup>28)</sup>, where ecological coherence across the student's entire daily environment including sleeping, eating, leisure, and communal worship produces the depth of moral internalisation that day-school programmes structurally cannot replicate. The partial and uneven parental reinforcement documented in teacher-parent communication records further compounds this ecological tension: research on adolescent support systems demonstrates that school-based character programmes are substantially amplified when families receive structured guidance on reinforcing the same values at home, yet no formalised parent engagement programme existed at MTs Miftahussalam. The absence of systematic family involvement therefore represents a preventable ecological disadvantage one theoretically explicable within the relational-ecological model and practically addressable through structured community outreach, consistent with the broader human services literature on ecological coherence interventions reviewed in the Introduction.

Taken together, the three mechanisms teacher moral exemplarity, institutional ritual density, and ecological coherence interact in ways the existing literature addressed only in isolation. The comparative research cited in the Introduction Malaysian findings on relational quality, Indonesian pesantren findings on ecological coherence, and cross-national findings on institutional governance and cultural integration each identified one dimension of the problem independently. The relational-ecological model proposed here integrates them into a single analytical framework specifying that the three dimensions are not

additive variables but interdependent forces: high teacher moral exemplarity operating within a low-coherence ecological environment the precise condition documented at MTs Miftahussalam will produce substantially weaker and less durable character outcomes than the same exemplarity operating within an ecologically coherent environment in which school, family, and community consistently reinforce aligned normative expectations. This interdependence is the model's most significant theoretical claim and the one most directly supported by the empirical evidence across all four thematic areas reported in the Results. The study's two-phase fieldwork design comparing October 2024 baseline observations against March 2025 data provides stronger grounds than a single-phase design for attributing observed conduct shifts to institutional programme effects, though the absence of a comparison group prevents causal inference, and the limitations noted in the Methodology single site, cross-sectional design, absence of home environment data, and gender imbalance in the student sample constrain the model's transferability pending multi-site comparative and longitudinal validation.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated how *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction operates as a character formation system in an Indonesian madrasah tsanawiyah, examining the relational, institutional, and ecological mechanisms that determine whether religious values are genuinely internalised or merely performed. Three principal findings emerged from triangulated analysis across two fieldwork phases. Teacher moral exemplarity operating through embodied daily conduct rather than formal lesson delivery consistently emerged as the primary driver

of student character outcomes across independent participant accounts, directly challenging the curriculum-centred assumptions that have dominated the Indonesian and broader Islamic education literature. The school's structured non-formal activities programme extended moral formation beyond the classroom by repositioning students as active moral agents through rotating prayer leadership and public religious roles, generating identity-constituting effects that didactic instruction cannot replicate. These two enabling mechanisms operated, however, against a persistent structural constraint: the competing socialisation pressures of students' extra-institutional peer environments, compounded by the absence of a formalised family engagement programme, produced an ecological incoherence that limited the programme's capacity to generate uniform and durable character outcomes across the student population. Synthesising these findings through Lickona's (1991) character education theory, Bourdieu's (1977) habitus concept, and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems framework, the study proposes a relational-ecological model of Islamic character formation that reconceptualises teacher personhood, institutional ritual density, and ecological coherence as three interdependent rather than additive determinants of character formation depth, with direct implications for the design of human support systems in Muslim-majority educational contexts.

For practitioners, school leaders, and policy-makers, the model's implications are specific and actionable. Teacher preparation programmes for *Aqidah Akhlak* that focus exclusively on content mastery and pedagogical technique are

systematically underinvesting in the dimension of preparation the evidence indicates matters most the teacher's own religious character, affective consistency, and capacity for relational trust-building and recruitment criteria should reflect this priority explicitly rather than treating personal religious conduct as a background assumption. At the institutional level, madrasah leaders who do not systematically engage families and local community structures in reinforcing school-based moral values are accepting a preventable ecological disadvantage; the study's findings suggest that structured parent communication programmes and community-level normative alignment initiatives would constitute high-leverage complements to classroom instruction that no curriculum reform alone can substitute. For researchers, the relational-ecological model provides a conceptual scaffold for

three urgent directions: multi-site comparative studies testing the model's transferability across madrasah types, resource levels, and cultural contexts; longitudinal designs capable of distinguishing programme-produced character development from pre-existing student orientations and of tracing the conditions under which students cross the critical threshold from moral compliance to genuine moral commitment; and mixed-methods studies incorporating direct ecological observation of students' home and community environments to move the field beyond its current reliance on school-based inference about the extra-institutional forces that the present study identifies as the most consequential structural determinant of Islamic character formation outcomes.

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