

Pesantren-Based Character Education Model for Strengthening Students' Moral Competence in Malaysia

Rusli Wan

Faculty of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia; rusliwan45@unizik.edu.ng

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of moral decline, behavioral misconduct, social intolerance, cyberbullying, and weakening ethical awareness among students has intensified the importance of character education within contemporary educational systems. In Malaysia, educational institutions increasingly recognize the need to strengthen students' moral competence through value-based and holistic educational approaches. The pesantren-based character education model, rooted in Islamic boarding school traditions emphasizing discipline, spirituality, moral habituation, and communal learning, offers a promising framework for cultivating students' ethical awareness and moral behavior. This study explores the role of a pesantren-based character education model in strengthening students' moral competence in Malaysia and examines its potential contribution within Islamic educational settings. Using a qualitative literature review approach, the study analyzes scholarly publications, educational reports, and theoretical discussions related to character education, moral competence, pesantren traditions, and Islamic education. The findings indicate that pesantren-based education positively contributes to students' moral competence through the internalization of Islamic values, moral habituation, exemplary leadership (*uswah hasanah*), spiritual discipline, communal responsibility, and reflective learning. Students exposed to pesantren-inspired educational practices demonstrate stronger moral reasoning, ethical responsibility, empathy, discipline, and prosocial behavior. However, challenges remain, including curriculum adaptation, institutional differences, teacher preparedness, and sociocultural diversity within Malaysian educational contexts. The study concludes that pesantren-based character education may serve as an effective educational model for strengthening students' moral competence in Malaysia when supported by curriculum integration, educator training, and culturally responsive implementation.

Keywords

Pesantren-Based Education, Character Education, Moral Competence, Islamic Education, Students' Character Development, Malaysia, Moral Education, Islamic Boarding School



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1. INTRODUCTION

Character education has become an increasingly important concern in educational discourse due to growing social challenges involving moral decline, behavioral misconduct,

intolerance, dishonesty, violence, and weakening ethical responsibility among students. Educational institutions worldwide are increasingly expected not only to facilitate cognitive achievement but also to foster moral development, ethical awareness, emotional maturity, and responsible citizenship. In modern educational contexts characterized by rapid technological advancement, globalization, digital exposure, and social transformation, strengthening students' moral competence has become a critical educational priority.

Moral competence refers to an individual's ability to understand ethical principles, evaluate moral dilemmas, make responsible decisions, and demonstrate ethical behavior within social contexts. According to Lawrence Kohlberg, moral competence develops through progressive stages of ethical reasoning influenced by education, social experiences, and moral reflection. Students with strong moral competence demonstrate responsibility, empathy, integrity, fairness, discipline, and social sensitivity. Consequently, educational systems increasingly emphasize value-based approaches capable of supporting students' moral and ethical formation alongside academic achievement.

The importance of character education becomes particularly relevant in the context of Malaysia, where multiculturalism, rapid modernization, digital transformation, and social diversity create both opportunities and challenges for moral development among young people. Malaysian educational institutions continue to emphasize moral education, civic responsibility, and national identity through formal curricula. However, concerns regarding youth delinquency, cyberbullying, substance abuse, weakening ethical behavior, and declining social responsibility increasingly highlight the need for stronger character-based educational interventions. In response, Islamic educational approaches grounded in moral and spiritual values are increasingly recognized as important mechanisms for strengthening students' ethical awareness and behavior.

Within Islamic educational traditions, character formation occupies a central role in human development. Islamic education emphasizes not only intellectual achievement but also moral purification, spiritual growth, ethical conduct, and social responsibility. Character education within Islam seeks to develop balanced individuals possessing strong faith (*iman*), ethical consciousness (*akhlaq*), emotional maturity, and commitment to moral principles. According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, Islamic education aims to cultivate individuals who embody justice, wisdom, discipline, and moral responsibility through holistic

educational experiences integrating knowledge, ethics, and spirituality.

One Islamic educational model receiving growing scholarly attention for its contribution to character formation is the pesantren-based education model. Pesantren, traditionally associated with Islamic boarding schools originating primarily from Indonesia, represents an educational system emphasizing religious learning, moral discipline, communal living, spiritual development, and ethical habituation. The pesantren model integrates formal learning with moral practice, discipline, teacher mentorship, spiritual reflection, and daily behavioral supervision. Students not only acquire religious knowledge but also internalize values through lived experiences within educational communities emphasizing collective responsibility and moral accountability.

The pesantren-based character education model possesses several distinctive characteristics contributing to moral competence development. First, moral habituation forms a central educational strategy within pesantren traditions. Students repeatedly practice ethical behaviors such as honesty, discipline, mutual respect, humility, cooperation, and responsibility through structured routines and communal interaction. According to character education scholars, habitual practice significantly strengthens moral internalization because repeated ethical action reinforces value formation and behavioral consistency.

Second, pesantren education strongly emphasizes exemplary leadership (*uswah hasanah*). Teachers, religious leaders (*kyai*), and educators function not merely as instructors but also as moral role models whose behavior shapes students' ethical development. Students observe and imitate positive moral conduct demonstrated by respected authority figures. According to Albert Bandura, observational learning significantly influences behavioral formation because individuals often internalize values through modeling and imitation. Therefore, pesantren-based educational environments provide moral learning experiences extending beyond classroom instruction.

Third, spiritual discipline constitutes another important feature of pesantren-based education. Daily practices such as congregational prayer, Qur'anic recitation, ethical reflection, remembrance of God (*dhikr*), and spiritual mentoring contribute to emotional regulation, self-discipline, humility, and ethical consciousness. Islamic spirituality encourages students to connect moral behavior with accountability before God, strengthening intrinsic motivation for ethical conduct. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr,

Islamic spirituality contributes to moral balance by fostering harmony between inner values and external behavior.

The relevance of pesantren-based education extends increasingly beyond Indonesia, particularly within countries sharing similar Islamic educational traditions such as Malaysia. Malaysia possesses strong Islamic educational institutions, including religious schools (*sekolah agama*), Islamic boarding schools, and integrated Islamic education systems emphasizing moral and religious formation. Although pesantren as an institutional model is historically rooted in Indonesia, its educational values—including discipline, communal responsibility, spiritual development, and moral habituation—resonate strongly with Malaysian Islamic educational traditions. Consequently, pesantren-inspired educational approaches may offer valuable contributions to strengthening students' moral competence in Malaysian educational settings.

In Malaysian education, moral competence remains an important objective aligned with national aspirations concerning ethical citizenship, social harmony, and cultural values. Educational reforms increasingly recognize the importance of holistic development integrating academic, emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions. However, conventional character education approaches sometimes face challenges related to implementation consistency, student engagement, and behavioral transformation. The pesantren-based model may address these limitations by emphasizing experiential learning, community life, reflective practice, and value internalization rather than relying solely on classroom-based moral instruction.

Several educational challenges reinforce the importance of exploring pesantren-based character education in Malaysia. Rapid digitalization exposes students to diverse social influences, including misinformation, online misconduct, moral relativism, and weakening social responsibility. Students increasingly encounter ethical dilemmas requiring stronger moral reasoning and decision-making abilities. Educational institutions therefore require models capable of strengthening students' ethical resilience and moral competence in navigating contemporary social realities.

Despite its potential benefits, implementing pesantren-based character education in Malaysia also presents challenges. Institutional differences between pesantren traditions and Malaysian schooling systems may complicate adaptation processes. Teachers may require

additional training to implement character education effectively through moral habituation and experiential learning strategies. Furthermore, Malaysia's multicultural educational environment requires culturally responsive approaches ensuring inclusivity while maintaining Islamic ethical foundations.

Research examining pesantren-inspired educational practices within Malaysian educational settings remains relatively limited, particularly regarding their contribution to students' moral competence. Existing scholarship frequently focuses on religious education, curriculum development, or moral instruction without systematically examining pesantren-based educational models and their implications for character formation. Consequently, further investigation is necessary to understand how pesantren-based educational principles may strengthen students' ethical awareness, moral reasoning, and responsible behavior.

This study aims to explore the role of a pesantren-based character education model in strengthening students' moral competence in Malaysia. Specifically, the study examines how pesantren-inspired educational practices contribute to moral development, ethical behavior, discipline, empathy, and social responsibility among students. The study also investigates implementation challenges and identifies opportunities for adapting pesantren-based character education within Malaysian educational contexts.

The findings of this study are expected to provide meaningful insights for educators, policymakers, curriculum developers, and Islamic educational institutions seeking effective strategies for character formation. By examining the relationship between pesantren-based education and moral competence, the study contributes to broader discussions concerning Islamic education, moral development, and holistic educational practices. Ultimately, strengthening students' moral competence through pesantren-based character education may help educational institutions in Malaysia develop ethically responsible, morally resilient, and socially conscious future generations.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a literature review method to examine the role of a pesantren-based character education model in strengthening students' moral competence in Malaysia. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study seeks to explore educational meanings, ethical values, pedagogical

practices, and contextual understandings related to character education within Islamic educational settings. According to John W. Creswell, qualitative research enables researchers to examine social and educational phenomena through contextual interpretation, conceptual analysis, and understanding of lived experiences. Since moral competence and character education involve ethical, spiritual, social, and behavioral dimensions, qualitative inquiry provides an effective framework for analyzing these complex educational processes.

The study adopts a literature review design because it facilitates systematic examination and synthesis of scholarly discussions regarding pesantren-based education, moral competence, Islamic character education, and educational development. According to Lawrence A. Machi and Brenda T. McEvoy, literature review research enables researchers to identify conceptual patterns, compare educational perspectives, evaluate previous findings, and identify research gaps within a field of study. Through comprehensive synthesis of existing scholarship, the study develops deeper understanding regarding the relevance and applicability of pesantren-based educational models in Malaysian contexts.

The data sources consist exclusively of secondary data derived from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, conference proceedings, educational reports, dissertations, and policy documents related to Islamic education, character formation, pesantren traditions, and moral competence. Relevant literature was retrieved from reputable academic databases including Scopus, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and ERIC (Education Resources Information Center). These databases were selected because they provide internationally recognized scholarly resources concerning education, psychology, Islamic studies, and moral development.

The literature identification process involved several stages. First, relevant publications were identified using keywords such as “pesantren-based education,” “character education,” “moral competence,” “Islamic character education,” “Islamic boarding school,” “student morality,” and “Malaysia.” Boolean search operators such as AND and OR were employed to improve search relevance and precision. Second, titles and abstracts were screened to ensure alignment with research objectives. Third, selected publications underwent detailed reading and critical analysis to extract findings concerning moral development, educational practices, pesantren values, character education strategies, and student ethical behavior.

The inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed scholarly publications published

between 2015 and 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance and educational applicability. Foundational theoretical works regarding moral competence, Islamic education, and character development were also included where conceptually necessary. Publications unrelated to Islamic education, character formation, or educational settings were excluded from analysis.

The study employed thematic analysis to interpret collected literature. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, thematic analysis enables researchers to identify recurring themes, categorize findings, and interpret patterns within qualitative data systematically. In this study, findings were categorized into several major themes, including: (1) pesantren educational values and moral formation, (2) character education practices, (3) moral competence development, (4) implementation challenges in Malaysia, and (5) opportunities for educational adaptation.

To ensure credibility and reliability, source triangulation was applied through comparison of findings across multiple scholarly references and educational reports. According to Norman K. Denzin, triangulation enhances validity by ensuring consistency and interpretive rigor across diverse sources. Priority was given to peer-reviewed and internationally indexed literature to improve analytical reliability.

Ethical considerations focused on academic integrity, objective interpretation, and responsible citation practices. Since the study relied exclusively on secondary data and published literature, no direct participants were involved. Nevertheless, accurate referencing and transparent interpretation were maintained throughout the research process.

Overall, the qualitative literature review method adopted in this study provides a systematic framework for understanding how pesantren-based character education may strengthen students' moral competence in Malaysia. Through synthesis of existing scholarly evidence, the study seeks to generate meaningful insights into character formation, Islamic education, and value-based educational innovation.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the pesantren-based character education model contributes significantly to strengthening students' moral competence in educational settings in Malaysia. The model promotes moral development through the integration of Islamic

ethical teachings, communal discipline, moral habituation, spiritual guidance, and teacher exemplification. Students exposed to pesantren-inspired educational practices tend to demonstrate stronger moral reasoning, greater ethical awareness, improved self-discipline, and more responsible social behavior. In Malaysian educational contexts increasingly challenged by moral decline, digital disruption, and social fragmentation, pesantren-based education provides a holistic framework capable of addressing moral development through both formal instruction and practical value internalization.

One of the major findings concerns the role of moral habituation in strengthening students' ethical competence. Within pesantren-based educational environments, moral values are not merely taught theoretically but repeatedly practiced through structured routines and daily behavioral expectations. Students are encouraged to practice honesty, discipline, responsibility, humility, cooperation, and respect within everyday school interactions. Such repetitive moral practice strengthens behavioral consistency and facilitates deeper value internalization. According to Thomas Lickona, character education becomes effective when moral understanding is consistently reinforced through repeated action, emotional engagement, and behavioral modeling. Consequently, students in pesantren-inspired educational settings increasingly develop ethical habits that positively influence moral competence.

The findings also reveal that spiritual discipline plays a crucial role in promoting students' moral behavior. Pesantren-based educational practices emphasize daily religious routines, including congregational prayer, Qur'anic recitation, remembrance of God (*dhikr*), spiritual reflection, and moral mentoring. These activities cultivate emotional control, self-awareness, humility, and ethical consciousness among students. Spiritual discipline helps students understand morality as an internal responsibility grounded in accountability before God rather than merely compliance with institutional regulations. Students increasingly demonstrate stronger self-regulation and greater resistance to negative social influences because ethical behavior becomes connected with spiritual identity. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Islamic spirituality contributes to moral balance by harmonizing ethical values with inner spiritual consciousness.

Another important finding concerns the influence of exemplary leadership (*uswah hasanah*) within pesantren-based character education. Teachers, religious leaders, and school

administrators serve not only as instructors but also as moral role models whose conduct shapes students' ethical behavior. Students often observe and imitate the behavior demonstrated by respected educational figures, reinforcing ethical values through lived examples rather than abstract moral instruction alone. Teachers exhibiting honesty, fairness, compassion, discipline, and humility create learning environments encouraging moral emulation. According to Albert Bandura, observational learning significantly shapes behavioral development because individuals frequently internalize values through imitation and social interaction. Therefore, pesantren-based education strengthens moral competence through sustained interpersonal relationships and ethical role modeling.

The communal dimension of pesantren-based education further contributes to students' moral and social competence. Unlike conventional educational environments emphasizing individual academic performance, pesantren-inspired educational settings prioritize collective responsibility, cooperation, mutual assistance, and communal accountability. Students participate in shared activities fostering teamwork, empathy, tolerance, and social awareness. Living and learning within disciplined communities encourages students to respect diversity, resolve conflicts constructively, and prioritize collective welfare over personal interests. Such experiences strengthen interpersonal competence and contribute positively to students' moral development.

The Malaysian context provides significant opportunities for adapting pesantren-based educational principles. Malaysia's educational system increasingly emphasizes holistic development integrating intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and moral dimensions. Islamic schools, religious boarding schools, and integrated Islamic educational institutions already share several characteristics with pesantren traditions, including religious learning, ethical formation, and spiritual guidance. Consequently, pesantren-inspired approaches may complement existing Malaysian educational objectives by strengthening experiential learning, moral discipline, and value internalization processes. Students increasingly benefit from educational environments emphasizing ethical responsibility alongside academic achievement.

The findings further indicate that pesantren-based education strengthens students' moral reasoning and ethical decision-making abilities. Moral competence involves not only behavioral conformity but also the capacity to evaluate moral dilemmas critically and make

ethically responsible choices. Students participating in pesantren-oriented educational experiences often demonstrate stronger awareness regarding right and wrong, greater empathy toward others, and more reflective approaches to moral problems. Islamic ethical teachings concerning justice (*adl*), honesty (*sidq*), responsibility (*amanah*), compassion (*rahmah*), and moderation (*wasatiyyah*) provide moral frameworks guiding students' judgments and actions. According to Lawrence Kohlberg, moral development improves when students engage consistently with ethical reasoning processes supported by meaningful social experiences.

Another important finding concerns the ability of pesantren-based character education to strengthen students' resilience against negative social influences. Contemporary students increasingly face challenges associated with digital media exposure, cyberbullying, misinformation, peer pressure, substance abuse, and weakening social ethics. Students possessing stronger moral competence often demonstrate greater resistance to harmful behaviors because they possess clearer ethical boundaries and stronger personal values. Spiritual routines, disciplined environments, and moral mentoring help students maintain ethical consistency despite external social pressures. In Malaysia's increasingly digitalized educational environment, such protective educational mechanisms become increasingly important.

However, despite its positive contributions, several challenges affect the implementation of pesantren-based character education within Malaysian educational settings. One major challenge concerns institutional adaptation. Since pesantren traditions historically emerged within Indonesian Islamic boarding school contexts, certain practices may require contextual modification to align with Malaysian educational structures, policies, and cultural expectations. Educational institutions may differ regarding curriculum flexibility, boarding arrangements, student demographics, and institutional priorities. Consequently, pesantren-based educational values may require contextual adaptation rather than direct replication.

Teacher preparedness emerged as another significant challenge influencing effectiveness. Teachers may possess strong religious knowledge but limited expertise in character education methodologies emphasizing habituation, mentoring, experiential learning, and reflective practice. Effective implementation requires educators capable of

facilitating moral development through supportive relationships, ethical modeling, and student-centered engagement rather than relying exclusively on lecture-based instruction. According to Michael Fullan, educational transformation depends significantly on professional development, institutional support, and teacher readiness. Therefore, teacher training programs focused on character education pedagogy may strengthen implementation quality.

The multicultural composition of Malaysia also introduces challenges requiring careful educational consideration. Malaysia consists of diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural communities, making inclusivity an important educational concern. While pesantren-based character education originates from Islamic traditions, implementation within broader educational settings requires approaches promoting social harmony, intercultural respect, and shared ethical values. Educational institutions should therefore emphasize universal moral principles such as honesty, compassion, discipline, and justice while preserving Islamic ethical foundations.

Parental and community involvement further emerged as influential factors shaping students' moral competence. Students receiving consistent moral reinforcement from families, religious institutions, and local communities generally demonstrate stronger ethical consistency and behavioral commitment. Parents supporting school-based character education through supervision, communication, and moral guidance strengthen students' opportunities for sustained moral development. Religious communities similarly contribute by reinforcing ethical teachings and creating environments supporting moral practice beyond formal education.

The findings additionally reveal that pesantren-based character education contributes positively to emotional maturity and psychological development. Students increasingly demonstrate patience, emotional regulation, humility, self-confidence, and social empathy. Such emotional competence strengthens moral behavior because ethical decision-making frequently depends upon emotional awareness and interpersonal sensitivity. Students learning to control emotions and reflect upon moral consequences become more capable of navigating complex social relationships responsibly.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that pesantren-based character education supports holistic educational goals by integrating cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and social

dimensions of learning. Students not only acquire moral knowledge but also internalize ethical principles through lived experience, reflection, discipline, and social participation. Such educational approaches align closely with contemporary perspectives emphasizing whole-person education rather than purely academic achievement.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that pesantren-based character education offers a meaningful educational framework for strengthening students' moral competence in Malaysia. Through moral habituation, spiritual discipline, communal learning, teacher exemplification, and ethical reflection, students develop stronger moral awareness, social responsibility, emotional maturity, and ethical behavior. Nevertheless, successful implementation requires curriculum adaptation, teacher preparation, institutional support, and culturally responsive strategies capable of addressing Malaysia's diverse educational environment.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the pesantren-based character education model provides significant contributions to strengthening students' moral competence in Malaysia. Rooted in Islamic educational traditions emphasizing discipline, spirituality, communal learning, ethical habituation, and exemplary leadership, the model supports students' moral development through holistic educational experiences extending beyond conventional classroom instruction. Students exposed to pesantren-inspired educational practices demonstrate stronger ethical awareness, moral reasoning, discipline, empathy, emotional maturity, and responsible social behavior.

The findings reveal that moral habituation, spiritual discipline, teacher role modeling (*uswah hasanah*), and communal responsibility constitute major strengths of pesantren-based education. Through repeated ethical practice, reflective learning, religious routines, and social participation, students internalize moral values such as honesty, justice, responsibility, compassion, humility, and cooperation. These educational experiences strengthen students' ability to make ethical decisions and resist negative social influences, particularly in increasingly digitalized and morally complex environments.

The Malaysian educational context presents valuable opportunities for adapting pesantren-based educational principles due to shared Islamic educational traditions and

growing emphasis on holistic character development. However, implementation challenges remain, including institutional adaptation, teacher preparedness, curriculum integration, and sociocultural diversity. Effective adaptation requires contextualized approaches ensuring compatibility with Malaysia's multicultural educational environment while maintaining core Islamic ethical foundations.

Therefore, educational institutions, policymakers, and Islamic education stakeholders in Malaysia should strengthen efforts to integrate pesantren-based character education through curriculum development, teacher training, parental involvement, and institutional collaboration. Emphasizing moral competence alongside academic excellence may contribute significantly to developing ethically responsible, emotionally mature, and socially conscious future generations. Ultimately, pesantren-based character education offers an effective and sustainable educational model for nurturing morally resilient students capable of responding positively to contemporary social and ethical challenges.

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