

INTEGRATION OF SOFT SKILLS STRATEGY IN TEACHING AKIDAH AKHLAK AT STATE MADRASAH ALIYAH

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Abstract

This study investigates the integration of soft-skill strategies in teaching *Akidah Akhlak* at MAN Kota Sorong, driven by the issue of limited awareness between teachers and students. The research aims to explore how interpersonal, intrapersonal, and effective communication skills are embedded within the teaching process, the role of teachers as facilitators and learning managers, and the forms of evaluation and constructive feedback used. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study involved 14 participants—12 students (6 males and six females) selected from 300 eleventh-grade students based on character diversity and family background, and 2 *Akidah Akhlak* teachers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and classroom observations and were then analysed thematically to reveal the lived experiences and meanings participants perceived. Findings indicate that most students recognized the partial integration of soft skills through thematic and cooperative learning; yet, several admitted that such practices were rarely emphasized or explicitly connected to moral instruction. Teachers reported limited mastery and consistency in applying soft-skill-based approaches due to curriculum rigidity and inadequate training. Despite these challenges, both teachers and students agreed that integrating soft skills—such as empathy, communication, and self-control—greatly enhances moral awareness and character formation. The study concludes that embedding soft skills into *Akidah Akhlak* instruction is essential for addressing pedagogical and behavioural challenges. It recommends systematic teacher training and technology-based learning designs to strengthen students' moral competence and adaptive interpersonal behaviour.

Keywords

Soft skills, Akidah Akhlak, Integration Strategy, Phenomenology, Islamic Education.



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INTRODUCTION

Islamic education in Indonesia in recent years has increasingly faced challenges in efforts to align moral learning with the demands of 21st-century learning, as stated in research conducted by Sofa et al. (2024) in Islamic Religious Education at Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic University, namely, practicing the integration of spiritual and emotional intelligence to students that can improve understanding of applying soft skills, considering the urgency of moral development amidst the challenges of the times, especially the rise of free association among teenagers. This is supported by a current study about *Akidah Akhlak* by Juli et al. (2025), which argues that digital ethical values and literacy could influence students' pedagogical and behavioural challenges because of the limited use of soft skills in the teaching and learning process. Relating to a study by Sukiman et al. (2024) at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, Yogyakarta, one of the central issues observed in *Akidah Akhlak* classes is the limited integration of soft skills—such as interpersonal communication, self-management, and effective collaboration—into classroom practice (Islami et al., 2025). The data show that both teachers and students often perceive moral education as a theoretical discipline, focusing on the memorization of concepts rather than the cultivation of behavioural competencies that reflect the values of *akhlak al-karimah* (Taufik, Baiti, and Ratnawati 2022; and Sugiri 2023). This disconnect has reduced the transformative potential of Islamic moral education to nurture learners who are not only knowledgeable but also emotionally intelligent and socially responsible (Afnan et al. 2025; Khasanah and Shodiq 2024; Nirwan and Hasbullah 2021; and Saeful Ahmad Agus Salim 2024).

According to Sukiman et al. (2024) Soft skills are widely recognized as essential competencies for personal and social development. According to contemporary educational theories (Islami et al., 2025); and (Afnan et al., 2025) Soft skills encompass three key dimensions: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and effective communication abilities. Since that, in the context of *Akidah Akhlak* learning, these skills are crucial for translating moral values into authentic practices within students' daily lives. Therefore, integrating soft skills into classroom activities means embedding them within existing subjects rather than treating them as separate learning outcomes. Such integration requires deliberate instructional strategies that promote reflection, empathy, teamwork, and communication (Muflihini et al., 2024).

Regarding the integration of soft skills into classroom activities, teachers play a pivotal role in this process as both facilitators and learning managers. They are responsible for designing learning experiences that connect moral concepts with students' real-life contexts, utilizing strategies such as thematic learning, cooperative learning, and student presentations and writing tasks (Rofiki 2018; Astrid, Hasanah, and Syafryadin 2022; Kurniawati and Indrasari 2023; and M. Andy Hermansyah 2024). These approaches allow learners to internalize Islamic values through active engagement and social interaction, making *Akidah Akhlak* more meaningful and applicable (Ipa Salma Alhamid; Indria Nur; Hasbullah 2024; and Indarti and Efendi 2024). Furthermore, assessment and feedback must extend beyond cognitive evaluation to include non-test instruments—such as behavioural observation and reflective journals and constructive feedback that supports continuous character growth (Roza 2023; Hasbullah, Wahidah, and Nanning 2023; and Fadlilaturrohmah and Shofiyuddin 2025).

Based on classroom observations, documentation analysis, and a series of interviews with three Akidah Akhlak teachers, the curriculum vice-chair, and six student representatives, the results of Akidah Akhlak teaching at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (MAN) Kota Sorong with a sample of 300 students showed limited and uneven achievement of religious attitudes and understanding competencies. Observationally, the majority of learning was dominated by lecture methods and memorization assignments, resulting in low student interaction. Lesson plans and syllabus documents described a focus on mastery of textual content and cognitive aspects (memorization of verses, definitions of morals), without a clear soft-skills assessment rubric. From interviews, teachers acknowledged that average formative scores tended to be good for the knowledge aspect, but affective and attitude assessments were recorded as weak due to insensitive assessment instruments and rarely systematically reported observation practices. Students reported fluctuating learning motivation. Some were motivated by extracurricular activities and teacher guidance, but many felt the learning was less relevant to their life experiences, resulting in less consistent transfer of akidah-moral values to daily behaviour. Documentary findings support this conclusion: report cards and teacher supervision results show significant variation between classes and teachers, and there is little evidence of systemic interventions that synergize values learning with the development of social-emotional skills.

Where teaching outcomes are deemed minimal or unattainable, several empirical background factors recur in the field data: (1) limited teacher pedagogical capacity—teachers have

not received specific ongoing training in soft-skills teaching strategies and interactive classroom management; (2) curriculum load and assessment orientation that emphasize cognitive output and summative evaluation, thus reducing time and resources for values learning; (3) large class sizes and limited facilities that suppress the use of personal mentoring methods and values practice activities; (4) unsystematic madrasah policies that integrate moral aspects into all subjects — although the vice-curriculum director and the madrasah principal have implemented several programs (remedial classes, weekly religious activities, regular supervision, and reward/disciplinary oversight), documentation and interviews indicate that the implementation of these policies is sporadic, lacking evaluation protocols, and poorly coordinated with teacher training. In response, the authors propose the integration of soft-skill strategies for teachers into the teaching of Akidah Akhlak — for example, cooperative learning based on values projects, role-plays for moral practice, scaffolding techniques for moral decision-making, authentic assessment (attitude rubrics and behaviour portfolios), and reflective dialogue practices involving parents and the madrasah community. These strategies not only add variety to the methods but also address several contributing factors to failure: structured training for teachers enhances pedagogical capacity; rubrics and formative assessments balance assessment orientation; and cross-curricular integration helps spread the implementation burden so that soft-skill development becomes a shared responsibility of the madrasah, not just the Akidah Akhlak subject alone.

In this regard, this study focuses on the subjective experiences of students and teachers at MAN Kota Sorong to reveal the integrative strategies applied in real classroom environments. The phenomenological lens enables exploring how participants interpret, internalize, and enact soft skills during the learning. This research contributes to the growing literature on developing Islamic education and soft skills, providing a model for character-based instruction that harmonizes spiritual, emotional, and social dimensions in teaching and learning.

METHOD

This research adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to deeply explore the lived experiences of teachers and students in integrating soft skills within the teaching of *Akidah Akhlak* at MAN Kota Sorong, Southwest Papua, Indonesia. The phenomenological approach was chosen to uncover the essence and meaning of soft skills integration as experienced by individuals involved in the educational process (Creswell and Clark 2011; and Sarwono 2011).

The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representativeness of gender, character diversity, and family background (Creswell 2009; Sari et al. 2023). Six males and six females were chosen from approximately 300 students in grade XI, who reflected varied personal characteristics such as discipline level, communication style, empathy, and cooperation. These variations were identified through teacher recommendations and preliminary classroom observations (Abduh et al., 2021). The inclusion of both male and female students also aimed to capture gender-based nuances in how soft skills are perceived and practiced in moral education. In addition, two *Akidah Akhlak* teachers participated in the study due to their extensive teaching experience of around five to ten years and active involvement in curriculum implementation (Taufik et al. 2022; Lambert et al. 2025).

In collecting data, it was carried out over four weeks using two primary techniques: 1) In-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions designed to elicit subjective experiences and perspectives; and 2) non-participant classroom observations, focusing on teacher-student interactions, cooperative learning activities, and behavioural manifestations of soft skills such as empathy, communication, and self-regulation (Nasikin, Abzar, and Afandi 2024; and Islami et al. 2025). The interview protocol consisted of four central questions: 1) How are faith, moral character, and student behaviour integrated with the dimensions of soft skills? 2) What is the teacher's role in integrating soft skills in Akidah Akhlak instruction? 3) Do you know or understand what soft skills mean in the context of learning? 4) Do you think it is beneficial to apply soft skills in teaching Akidah Akhlak, and if so, how? Each interview lasted approximately 40–50 minutes and was conducted in a quiet classroom setting to allow free expression. All sessions were recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis (Ali & Rahman, 2018).

In analysing the data collected, the data were analysed using the Moustakas (1994) phenomenological analysis framework (Nur, 2022), which includes: Epoche (bracketing) – suspending the researcher's preconceptions; Horizontalization – identifying significant statements related to the phenomenon; Textural and structural description – describing *what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced; and Synthesis of meanings and essences – developing a composite understanding of the phenomenon (Ipa Salma Alhamid; Indria Nur; Hasbullah 2024; and Tiara Vinnilarika Sari and Muamaroh, 2024).

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed several strategies, including triangulation between interview data and observational data, member checking by participants to verify the

accuracy of interpretations, and peer debriefing among fellow researchers to enhance analytical rigor (M. Andy Hermansyah 2024; and Sukiman et al. 2024). Ethical considerations were also maintained, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms for all respondents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The analysis of in-depth interviews and observations revealed diverse experiences and perceptions among the 12 students (6 male and six female) and 2 *Akidah Akhlak* teachers regarding the integration of soft skills in religious moral education. The responses reflected both supportive and contrasting views, influenced by factors such as gender, character traits, and family backgrounds.

Table 1. Soft-Skill-Based Approaches

Interpersonal Skills, Intrapersonal Skills, and Effective Communication Skills
How are faith, moral character, and student behaviour integrated with the dimensions of soft skills?
What is the teacher's role in integrating soft skills in Akidah Akhlak instruction?
Do you know or understand what soft skills mean in the context of learning?
Do you think it is beneficial to apply soft skills in teaching Akidah Akhlak, and if so, how?

The first question, concerning how faith, moral behaviour, and student attitudes were integrated with soft-skill dimensions, elicited mixed insights. *Female students* tended to emphasize emotional and interpersonal aspects. *Student 1* noted that moral education strengthened her empathy and ability to communicate politely. *Students 2* admitted that although the teacher reminded students to be respectful, she rarely realized that this was part of "soft skills." *Student 3* felt that "listening, patience, and helping others" are forms of *akhlaq* that align with interpersonal skills. Meanwhile, *Student 4* stated that learning still felt theoretical, "mostly memorization of *dalil*, not much practice." *Student 5* shared that she valued lessons about sincerity and self-control but did not relate them to soft skills until this interview. *Student 6* emphasized that through group work, she learned cooperation and tolerance, showing an implicit understanding of soft-skill application.

Male students provided varied responses reflecting both awareness and scepticism. *Student 7* argued that moral lessons "focus on right and wrong, not necessarily on how to communicate." *Student 8* recognized that "group discussions and debates" indirectly trained teamwork, but he found no explicit connection made by teachers. *Student 9* mentioned that self-control and emotional

regulation, emphasized in class, were examples of intrapersonal soft skills. In contrast, *Student 10* felt that “*Akidah Akhlak* is about faith, not about social skills.” *Student 11* acknowledged that discussions made him “more confident to express Islamic views politely.” *Student 12* found that storytelling about moral heroes helped him understand “how to act and respond kindly to others.”

The second interview question explored the teachers’ role in integrating soft skills. Both teachers expressed limited familiarity and inconsistent application. *Teacher 1* said: “I rarely use the term ‘soft skills,’ though I think moral education naturally includes it.” *Teacher 2* admitted: “I sometimes use cooperative learning or role-play, but I never plan them specifically as soft-skill integration.” Observations confirmed that while teachers encouraged discipline and respect, explicit soft-skill instruction such as communication, empathy, or leadership was rarely articulated.

Regarding the third question, about understanding of soft skills, only four students (*Student 1*, *Student 3*, *Student 8*, *Student 9*) demonstrated clear comprehension. They defined soft skills as communication, cooperation, and attitude in interaction. The remaining eight students admitted that they had heard the term but could not explain it. One student, *Student 4*, stated: “I thought soft skills were something for job training, not for religion class.” This indicates a conceptual gap between students’ perception and the intended educational purpose of *Akidah Akhlak*.

The fourth question explored the perceived benefits of soft-skill integration. All students acknowledged its importance. *Student 1* shared that it made her “more polite in speaking.” *Student 4* found it helped her “work well with others.” *Student 6* noted that empathy was strengthened “when doing reflection tasks.” *Student 8* appreciated how it made learning “more interesting and practical.” *Student 9* linked soft skills to *da’wah*, saying that “it helps us communicate Islamic values better.” *Student 11* believed it built self-confidence, while *Student 12* said that “it teaches us to control anger and respect opinions.”

Teachers also confirmed the benefits. *Teacher 1* said that when students “perform role-play or group discussions, they show improvement in respect and teamwork.” *Teacher 2* highlighted that integrating soft skills “transforms moral learning into real behaviour, not just theory.” Observation data supported this, showing improved participation and mutual respect during cooperative tasks. However, both teachers admitted to challenges. They lacked structured training and clear curricular guidance on integrating soft skills into *Akidah Akhlak*. *Teacher 2* explained: “We are used to teaching morals through lecture and memorization. It’s difficult to design activities that measure behaviour.” Despite this, they expressed a willingness to adapt modern strategies aligned with student needs

and 21st-century skills.

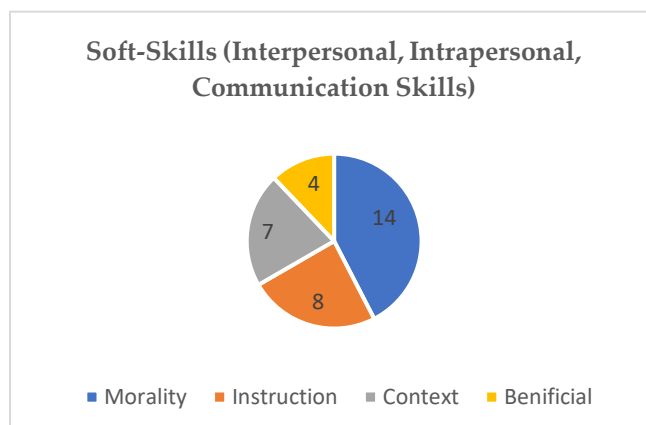


Figure 1. Pie Chart of Soft Skill Base Approaches

Source: MAN Kota Sorong, 2025

The pie chart above describes the number of participants' responses to interview questions about their faith and morality, the teacher's role and care in integrating soft skills in *Akidah Akhlak* instruction, participants' understanding of the soft skills in the context of learning, and the benefits of applying soft skills in teaching *Akidah Akhlak*. The pie chart shows that all 14 participants (six female students) tended to emphasize emotional and interpersonal aspects. Six male students argued that moral lessons "focus on right and wrong, not necessarily on how to communicate, and they tend to self-control and emotional regulation, which were emphasized in class, were examples of intrapersonal soft skills. Then, teachers think moral education naturally includes.

Overall, the findings reveal a partial, implicit, and unstandardized integration of soft skills in the teaching of *Akidah Akhlak* at MAN Kota Sorong. Students benefit from the moral context and cooperative learning, but neither teachers nor learners possess a systematic framework for embedding or evaluating soft skills holistically.

Discussion

This study explored how soft skills are strategically integrated into the teaching of *Akidah Akhlak* at MAN Kota Sorong. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research captured the lived experiences of 12 students and 2 *Akidah Akhlak* teachers selected from 300 eleventh-grade students. According Yulianti et al., (2023) Thematic analysis revealed three major dimensions of soft-skill integration: interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, and effective communication, supported by the strategic roles of teachers as facilitators and learning managers,

as well as by authentic evaluation and constructive feedback mechanisms. The discussion is presented in a systematic structure as follows.

1. Integration of Soft Skills within the Teaching Process

1.1 Development of Interpersonal Skills

The findings show that interpersonal skills were embedded through collaborative learning activities such as group discussions, case-based simulations, and peer mentoring. These activities are aligned with research by Febrianti & Rahmat (2025) and Suryana et al. (2025) that encouraged students to practice empathy, respect differences, negotiate moral dilemmas, and build cooperative relationships. Classroom observations confirmed that teachers often introduced real-life moral issues related to social interactions—such as peer conflict, online behaviour, and community etiquette—to stimulate value-based dialogue. This indicates that Akidah Akhlak instruction goes beyond doctrinal knowledge by fostering social sensitivity and moral cooperation among students.

1.2 Development of Intrapersonal Skills

Intrapersonal skills were integrated through structured reflection activities—including self-assessment, reflective journaling, and guided contemplation of moral concepts (Iskandarsyah & Abdul Fattah Nasution, 2024). These pedagogical strategies allowed students to examine their emotions, motivations, weaknesses, and personal moral struggles in a private and meaningful way. The majority of student participants reported that such reflective practices enhanced their self-awareness and self-regulation, helping them to align their personal behaviour with Islamic ethical principles. This demonstrates that Akidah Akhlak classes function as a developmental space for cultivating moral self-understanding and inner discipline.

1.3 Development of Effective Communication Skills

The teaching process also embedded communication skills through interactive dialogue, open-ended questioning, structured debates, and student-led presentations (Arsyad, 2023). Teachers intentionally created a safe environment where students were encouraged to articulate opinions, justify moral positions, and negotiate meanings. Students perceived the class as a supportive space that allowed them to communicate without fear of judgment. Observations further revealed that teachers emphasized adab (ethical etiquette) in speaking—such as clarity, respectfulness, and listening—thereby integrating Islamic moral values with practical communication competencies.

2. Teachers' Roles as Facilitators and Learning Managers

The study highlights the dual role of Akidah Akhlak teachers as both facilitators of moral development and managers of the learning process (Amin et al., 2025) and (Febrianti & Rahmat, 2025). The findings in this study show that as facilitators, they cultivated an inclusive, dialogic, and value-laden classroom atmosphere that encouraged students' active participation and personal expression. They guided discussions without dominating them, allowing students to explore moral reasoning based on their experiences.

In addition, teachers, as learning managers, designed situational learning experiences by connecting instructional content with students' everyday realities. They strategically organized learning tasks that required students to practice soft skills in varied social contexts. Teachers also monitored not only students' academic development but also their behavioural and emotional growth, demonstrating a holistic approach to moral and character education.

3. Evaluation Mechanisms and Constructive Feedback

3.1 Authentic and Behaviour-Based Evaluation

Evaluation practices extended beyond cognitive assessment to include authentic observation of students' behaviours, attitudes, and interpersonal interactions (Sofiar et al., 2025). Teachers evaluated how students collaborated, resolved conflicts, communicated ideas, and demonstrated discipline. This aligns with competency-based educational approaches that emphasize observable evidence of character formation.

3.2 Self-Assessment and Peer Assessment

The study found that teachers implemented reflective self-assessment and peer assessment to help students identify their strengths and weaknesses. According to (Sari et al., 2023); and (Baidya & Saha, 2025) These assessment practices encouraged students to develop metacognitive awareness and to take responsibility for their moral and emotional growth. Peer assessment also provided opportunities for students to receive feedback from different perspectives.

3.3 Constructive Feedback for Moral and Soft Skill Development

Constructive feedback emerged as a central mechanism for guiding student improvement (Juli et al., 2025); and (Alkadry et al., 2025). Teachers delivered feedback individually and contextually, focusing on specific behaviours rather than personal judgment. Feedback was communicated in supportive tones, often resembling mentoring or parental guidance. Students reported that such feedback motivated them to reflect and improve their interpersonal conduct,

communication behaviour, and self-control. This finding underscores that feedback in Akidah Akhlak classes functions as a tool for character refinement rather than merely academic correction.

4. Meaning-Making and Lived Experiences of Participants

The thematic analysis revealed that students and teachers perceived soft-skill integration as a transformative component of Akidah Akhlak learning. Students described the learning environment as a “moral laboratory” where they could test, evaluate, and refine their attitudes and behaviour. Teachers viewed their role as moral mentors who integrate Islamic values, personal growth, and social skills in a coherent learning framework. These shared meanings highlight that soft-skill integration is not incidental but central to the identity of Akidah Akhlak as a value-based discipline.

The results illustrate a dynamic yet fragmented understanding of soft skills within *Akidah Akhlak* instruction. The gender dimension plays a subtle role: female students showed higher emotional awareness and empathy, while male students emphasized behavioural discipline and leadership. This aligns with previous studies (Islami et al., 2025), which indicates that gender differences affect how moral and emotional competencies are internalized. The results further show that soft skills are not explicitly taught but rather embedded within moral lessons through teacher modelling, storytelling, and group interaction. This implicit form of integration resonates with Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, where students learn through observation and imitation rather than formal instruction. Another major theme is the lack of conceptual clarity. Students and teachers view *Akidah Akhlak* as a spiritual subject, focusing on faith and moral obligation, rather than as a space for developing communication, empathy, and collaboration. This misconception reflects a broader pedagogical issue where religious education remains cognitive-oriented, as highlighted by recent research (Manshur and Munif, 2023; Astrid et al., 2022).

Teachers’ limited familiarity with the terminology and framework of soft skills integration or combination suggests the need for professional development. *T1* and *T2*’s admissions reveal that while moral values are emphasized, the methods remain traditional and teacher-centred. Without targeted training, the potential of *Akidah Akhlak* as a medium for holistic character formation remains underutilized. In comparing the male and female students’ responses, the former often viewed soft skills as secondary to faith, whereas the latter recognized emotional empathy as central to moral growth. This difference highlights how personal and social experiences, often shaped by family background, affect the internalization of Islamic values.

The study also underscores the importance of the classroom environment. Observations showed that when teachers facilitated discussions and cooperative activities, students became more active, reflective, and respectful. However, in lecture-based sessions, student engagement declined sharply. This suggests that student-centred pedagogy is more conducive to the development of soft skills in moral education (Afnan et al., 2025). Another notable issue is the absence of a systematic evaluation. Teachers rely on cognitive tests rather than non-test instruments such as attitude checklists, peer assessment, or reflective journals. This limits their ability to measure behavioural transformation a core element of soft skills learning (Annala et al. 2023; Fadlilaturrohman and Shofiyuddin 2025).

Despite these challenges, the study identifies significant potential for transformation. Integrating thematic learning, cooperative strategies, and student presentations can make *Akidah Akhlak* more interactive and relevant to contemporary learners. As students themselves recognized, soft skills help bridge moral understanding with real-life behaviour. The phenomenological approach used in this study highlights the depth of students' experiences, showing that moral learning becomes meaningful only when students perceive it as applicable to daily interactions. Their lived experiences reveal both the internal struggle and the aspiration to embody *akhlaq al-karimah* through communication, empathy, and cooperation. Finally, the findings contribute to the broader discourse on Islamic education reform, emphasizing the need for integration between spiritual and socio-emotional development. In the digital age, where communication and collaboration are vital, embedding soft skills in religious instruction offers a pathway to align Islamic education with global educational competencies.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the integration of soft skills in *Akidah Akhlak* learning at MAN Kota Sorong remains largely implicit and unsystematic. While students and teachers acknowledge the moral importance of soft skills, their understanding is fragmented and unstructured. The phenomenological findings reveal that integration occurs naturally through discussions, cooperation, and teacher modelling, yet lacks deliberate pedagogical design. Gender and family background also shape students' perceptions. Female students emphasize empathy and interpersonal relations, while male students highlight self-control and discipline. Teachers, meanwhile, perceive moral instruction as inherently soft-skill oriented but are constrained by

limited training, time, and curricular guidance. Ultimately, soft-skill integration in *Akidah Akhlak* holds transformative potential for character education in Islamic schools. By shifting from theoretical instruction to experiential, reflective, and communicative learning, *Akidah Akhlak* can better achieve its goal of nurturing morally upright, emotionally intelligent, and socially adaptive Muslim youth.

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