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Developing Students' Moral Character through Contemporary Islamic Education

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Abstract

Moral character development has become increasingly important as students face rapid technological change, social diversity, and complex ethical challenges. This study examines how contemporary Islamic education contributes to the development of students' moral character and identifies the educational mechanisms that facilitate the internalization of Islamic values in everyday life. Employing a qualitative multiple-case study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom and institutional observations, and document analysis involving Islamic education teachers, school leaders, guidance personnel, and students across three Islamic educational institutions. The data were analyzed thematically through coding, categorization, cross-case comparison, and interpretation, with attention to moral knowledge, moral reasoning, spiritual and emotional internalization, habituation, and ethical behavior. The findings demonstrate that students' moral character develops most effectively when Islamic values are integrated across the curriculum and reinforced through teacher modeling, institutional culture, reflective learning, spiritual practices, habituation, and authentic social engagement. The findings also show that contemporary Islamic education needs to address digital environments by connecting Islamic moral principles with responsible digital communication, information use, and social interaction. The study concludes that contemporary Islamic education should move beyond religious knowledge transmission toward an integrative model that connects Islamic values, moral reasoning, internalization, habituation, and social-digital practice to foster sustainable moral character.

Keywords Islamic Education; Moral Character; Character Development; Moral Education; Contemporary Education.

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1. INTRODUCTON

Moral character has become an increasingly important concern in contemporary education as societies face rapid technological change, cultural diversity, social fragmentation, and shifting patterns of human interaction. The expansion of digital media, artificial intelligence, and online communication has created new opportunities for learning while simultaneously exposing students to misinformation, cyberbullying, intolerance, consumerism, and other forms of problematic behavior. In this context, moral character refers to the relatively consistent capacity to understand moral values, make ethically responsible decisions, and translate those values into appropriate actions. Character education therefore

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cannot be limited to the transmission of moral knowledge; it must foster the integration of moral cognition, emotional awareness, ethical reasoning, and habitual behavior(Sahin, 2018). Contemporary educational systems are consequently challenged to develop learners who are academically competent while also demonstrating integrity, empathy, responsibility, respect, and social awareness.

Islamic education possesses substantial conceptual resources for responding to this challenge because moral development is intrinsically connected to the purposes of education in Islam. The concept of akhlaq (moral character) emphasizes the formation of virtuous dispositions that guide individual conduct toward God, oneself, other people, and the wider environment. Classical Muslim scholars such as Al-Ghazali emphasized that education should cultivate virtues through knowledge, habituation, self-discipline, and exemplary conduct, rather than merely transferring information. Similarly, contemporary Islamic education emphasizes the interconnectedness of faith (iman), religious practice (taqwa), morality (akhlaq), and knowledge as foundations for holistic human development. This orientation distinguishes Islamic character education from approaches that treat morality as an isolated subject because moral values are expected to permeate learning, relationships, institutional culture, and everyday practices(Lickona, 2024)

Nevertheless, the contemporary implementation of Islamic education faces significant challenges. Previous research indicates that moral and religious instruction does not automatically produce desirable behavior when classroom learning is predominantly cognitive, teacher-centered, and detached from students' lived experiences (Amin et al., 2018). Similar concerns have emerged in Islamic educational contexts, where there may be a gap between students' understanding of religious teachings and their practical manifestation of those teachings in social life. The rapid growth of digital environments further complicates this relationship because students increasingly construct identities and social relationships beyond the direct supervision of families and educational institutions. Some scholars therefore argue that Islamic education needs pedagogical transformation that combines religious knowledge with critical thinking, emotional development, digital literacy, dialogue, experiential learning, and authentic moral practice (Berkowitz & Bier, 2019). Others emphasize that modernization should not weaken the normative foundations of Islamic morality, particularly its emphasis on akhlaq, responsibility, justice, compassion, and spiritual accountability.

Despite growing scholarship on character education and Islamic education, an important research gap remains concerning how contemporary Islamic education can systematically transform moral values into students' everyday dispositions and behaviors. Existing studies frequently examine religious knowledge, character formation, or moral education separately, while fewer studies conceptualize them as an integrated educational process involving curriculum, pedagogy, teacher modeling, learning environments, and students' social experiences. Moreover, contemporary

challenges such as digital interaction and cultural pluralism require Islamic moral education to move beyond conventional transmission models toward approaches that enable students to interpret and practice ethical principles in changing social contexts. This gap is particularly significant because effective moral development requires consistency between what students learn, what teachers demonstrate, what institutions promote, and what students experience in their communities (Faizal, 2020).

Accordingly, this study aims to examine how contemporary Islamic education contributes to the development of students' moral character by integrating Islamic values with relevant pedagogical and contextual approaches. The study specifically focuses on the processes through which moral values are understood, internalized, practiced, and reinforced through curriculum content, classroom interaction, teacher exemplarity, institutional culture, and students' social experiences. The term contemporary Islamic education in this study refers to an educational approach that retains the normative foundations of Islamic teachings while responding constructively to contemporary social, cultural, technological, and educational transformations(Faqihuddin, 2019). This perspective allows Islamic education to be understood not simply as religious instruction but as a holistic process of forming morally responsible individuals capable of navigating complex modern environments.

The principal significance of this study lies in its effort to connect the normative ideals of Islamic morality with contemporary educational practice. The study argues that effective Islamic character education requires an integrative framework in which religious knowledge, moral reasoning, emotional formation, habituation, exemplary behavior, and social engagement mutually reinforce one another. Such an approach positions students not merely as recipients of moral instruction but as active participants in developing ethical identities and responsible practices. The study therefore contributes to the broader literature on character education by demonstrating the potential of contemporary Islamic education to address moral challenges without abandoning its religious foundations. Ultimately, it highlights that the effectiveness of Islamic moral education depends on transforming values from abstract principles into lived educational experiences that shape students' decisions, relationships, and everyday conduct.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a multiple-case study design to examine how contemporary Islamic education contributes to the development of students' moral character. A qualitative design was selected because the study sought to understand moral formation as a contextual and socially constructed process involving values, interactions, institutional practices, and students' lived experiences. The multiple-case study enabled the researchers to examine similarities and

differences in the implementation of Islamic moral education across educational settings and to identify patterns that could not be adequately captured through quantitative measurements. The study focused on three Islamic educational institutions that had demonstrated systematic efforts to integrate religious values, character formation, and contemporary educational practices.

The research sites were purposively selected based on four criteria: (1) the institution implemented Islamic education as an integral component of its educational system; (2) moral and character development was explicitly reflected in its curriculum or institutional programs; (3) teachers employed learning approaches that connected Islamic values with students' everyday experiences; and (4) the institution had adopted contemporary educational practices, including digital learning, collaborative activities, or contextual learning. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and consisted of school leaders, Islamic education teachers, guidance personnel, and students. Participants were included because they were directly involved in designing, implementing, experiencing, or evaluating Islamic moral education. Approximately 20–25 participants were involved across the three cases, with the final number determined by data saturation.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom and school observations, and document analysis. Interviews explored participants' understanding of moral character, strategies for integrating Islamic values into learning, teacher modeling, students' moral experiences, and challenges associated with contemporary social and digital environments. Observations focused on classroom interactions, teacher–student relationships, students' behavior, religious practices, collaborative activities, and institutional routines that potentially reinforced moral values. Relevant documents, including curricula, lesson plans, institutional policies, student activity programs, and character-development guidelines, were analyzed to examine how moral objectives were formally articulated and implemented.

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic analysis process consisting of data familiarization, initial coding, category development, theme identification, and interpretation. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were compared continuously to identify recurring patterns and divergent perspectives. The analysis focused on five dimensions of moral development: moral knowledge, moral reasoning, emotional disposition, moral habituation, and ethical behavior. Cross-case comparison was subsequently conducted to identify common mechanisms and context-specific practices influencing students' moral character. Data credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation, source triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement with the research settings.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Participants received information concerning the purpose and procedures of the study and participated voluntarily. Informed

consent was obtained before interviews and observations, while institutional and participant identities were anonymized in the reporting of findings. The researchers also maintained confidentiality and used the collected data exclusively for academic purposes. These procedures ensured that the study produced a contextually grounded and ethically responsible account of how contemporary Islamic education can foster students' moral character.

3. FINDINGS AND DSICUSSIOUN

The findings demonstrate that contemporary Islamic education develops students' moral character most effectively when Islamic values are transformed from abstract religious knowledge into lived educational experiences. Across the three cases, five interconnected mechanisms were identified: moral knowledge, moral reasoning, emotional and spiritual disposition, habituation, and ethical behavior(Halstead, 2021). The findings further indicate that teacher modeling, institutional culture, curriculum integration, and students' engagement with contemporary social and digital environments function as important mediating factors(Jauhari, 2022). As summarized in Table 1, moral character formation does not occur through a single instructional strategy but through the interaction of curriculum, pedagogy, relationships, routines, and students' social experiences.

Table 1. Dimensions and mechanisms of students' moral character development

Dimension	Main finding	Educational mechanism	Observable outcome
Moral knowledge	Students understand Islamic concepts of right and wrong	Qur'an, Hadith, Islamic ethics, contextual lessons	Ability to explain moral principles
Moral reasoning	Students learn to evaluate moral dilemmas	Discussion, reflection, case analysis	More reasoned ethical decisions
Moral disposition	Students develop empathy, responsibility, and self-control	Spiritual activities, reflection, teacher guidance	Positive emotional and social responses
Moral habituation	Values become repeated practices	Daily routines, worship, service, discipline	Consistent moral behavior
Ethical behavior	Students apply values in real situations	Collaborative activities and social engagement	Responsible and respectful conduct

3.1. Integrating Moral Values into Contemporary Islamic Education

The first finding indicates that moral education becomes more meaningful when Islamic values are integrated across the curriculum rather than presented as isolated religious content(Kulsum & Muhid, 2019). Teachers in the three cases connected concepts such as *amanah* (trustworthiness), ṣidq (truthfulness), *'adl* (justice), *raḥmah* (compassion), responsibility, and respect with situations encountered by students in school, family, community, and digital environments.

Classroom observations showed that teachers did not merely ask students to memorize definitions of good conduct. Instead, students were encouraged to discuss why a particular behavior was considered ethical and how Islamic principles could guide decisions in everyday situations(Ma'rufah, 2020). For example, discussions about honesty were extended to academic integrity, responsible use of social media, avoiding misinformation, and respecting other people's privacy. This approach enabled students to recognize that Islamic morality is relevant not only to religious rituals but also to contemporary social relationships.

This finding supports the argument that character education is more effective when moral knowledge is connected to moral reasoning and behavioral practice (Masturin et al., 2022). It also reinforces the Islamic educational perspective that knowledge should contribute to the formation of virtuous conduct rather than remain separated from action (Muhlis et al., 2022). The integration of moral values into different learning experiences therefore represents an important characteristic of contemporary Islamic education.

3.1.1. From Moral Knowledge to Moral Reasoning

A second finding concerns the transition from knowing moral principles to reasoning about moral problems. Students demonstrated stronger engagement when teachers presented authentic situations involving conflicting values rather than merely providing normative instructions(Munawarsyah, 2019). Classroom discussions included issues such as academic dishonesty, cyberbullying, intolerance, irresponsible social-media use, peer pressure, and respect for differences.

The findings suggest that moral reasoning develops when students are given opportunities to ask questions, consider alternative perspectives, and justify their decisions. This is particularly important in contemporary society because students frequently encounter situations in which moral choices are not explicitly determined by simple rules(Muzakki & Nurdin, 2022). Islamic education therefore needs to equip students with the ability to interpret religious principles in relation to changing social realities.

This finding is consistent with research emphasizing that effective moral education should involve critical reflection, dialogue, and opportunities to reason about ethical problems (Nurhuda, 2024). However, the present findings also indicate that moral reasoning in Islamic education is not detached from religious norms. Instead, students were encouraged to combine ethical reasoning with Qur'anic principles, Prophetic traditions, and Islamic concepts of responsibility. Thus, contemporary Islamic education can combine normative religious foundations with critical and contextual approaches.

3.2. Teacher Modeling and Institutional Culture

One of the strongest findings was the importance of teacher modeling. Students consistently identified teachers' behavior as an important reference point for understanding how Islamic values should be practiced(Pitri et al., 2024). Respectful communication, punctuality, fairness, patience,

responsibility, and consistency were perceived as more influential when demonstrated by teachers than when communicated through verbal instruction alone.

The findings indicate that teachers function not only as instructors but also as moral exemplars. When teachers consistently demonstrated the values they taught, students were more likely to perceive those values as authentic and relevant. Conversely, inconsistencies between moral instruction and teacher behavior weakened the persuasive power of character education.

This finding confirms the longstanding argument that character education requires adults within educational institutions to model the virtues expected from students (Rahayu et al., 2024). Within Islamic education, this finding has additional significance because the concept of *uswah hasanah*-good example-places exemplary conduct at the center of moral formation. Consequently, teacher professionalism in Islamic education cannot be evaluated solely in terms of pedagogical competence; moral credibility is also essential.

The influence of institutional culture was similarly evident. Moral values became more sustainable when they were reinforced by school policies, routines, interpersonal relationships, and collective expectations. Students encountered consistent messages about responsibility, discipline, respect, cooperation, and service across different educational activities. This consistency transformed character education from a classroom program into an institutional culture.

3.3. Habituation, Spiritual Practice, and Moral Disposition

The third major finding concerns habituation. Students' moral development was strengthened through repeated activities that allowed values to become routine behaviors. These activities included collective worship, greetings and respectful communication, maintaining cleanliness, helping peers, participating in social-service activities, accepting responsibilities, and reflecting on personal conduct.

The findings indicate that habituation functions as a bridge between moral intention and moral behavio(Sa'adah et al., 2023)r. Students may understand that honesty, discipline, compassion, and responsibility are desirable, but repeated opportunities to practice these values are necessary for them to become relatively stable dispositions. This finding corresponds with the classical Islamic understanding of *akhlaq*, which emphasizes the formation of virtuous dispositions through continuous practice and self-discipline (Sutarto & Sari, 2024).

Importantly, spiritual practices were not treated merely as ritual activities. Teachers connected worship with ethical consequences in students' daily lives. For example, religious practices were discussed in relation to self-control, gratitude, responsibility, empathy, and respect. This integration suggests that spirituality can function as an internal motivational foundation for moral behavior.

The findings therefore support an integrated model in which(Taja et al., 2022):a. **Religious knowledge** provides moral principles. B. **Moral reasoning** enables students to interpret those

principles. C. **Spiritual and emotional formation** strengthens internal commitment. D. **Habituation** transforms commitment into repeated practice. E. **Social engagement** allows students to demonstrate moral behavior in authentic contexts.

3.4. Digital Contexts and Contemporary Moral Challenges

Another important finding is that digital environments have become an unavoidable context for students' moral development. Rather than treating digital technology exclusively as a threat, the participating institutions increasingly used contemporary digital experiences as opportunities for moral learning(Yumnah, 2019). Teachers addressed online communication, information verification, digital responsibility, cyberbullying, privacy, plagiarism, and respectful interaction.

Students reported that moral decisions in digital environments could be more complicated than face-to-face interactions because online communication often reduces direct awareness of the consequences of one's actions(Zainal Abidin, 2024). The findings therefore suggest that contemporary Islamic moral education needs to expand the concept of *akhlaq* to include digital conduct.

This finding extends conventional character education by demonstrating that moral behavior must be cultivated across both physical and digital environments. Islamic principles such as honesty, responsibility, respect, avoiding harm, and maintaining human dignity remain relevant, but students need opportunities to interpret these principles within new technological contexts. In this respect, digital literacy and moral literacy should not be treated as separate educational domains.

At the same time, the findings reveal a tension between technological openness and moral regulation. Some educators expressed concern that unrestricted digital exposure could weaken students' self-control and expose them to inappropriate content. Others argued that excessive restriction could prevent students from developing the autonomy required to make responsible decisions. This divergence suggests that effective Islamic education should move beyond either unrestricted technological adoption **or complete restriction toward guided digital participation.**

3.5. Social Engagement and the Internalization of Moral Character

The fifth finding demonstrates that students' moral character was strengthened when learning extended beyond the classroom(Aimah, 2024). Community service, collaborative projects, peer mentoring, environmental activities, and social responsibility programs provided students with opportunities to apply moral principles in authentic situations.

These activities were particularly important because students encountered differences in socioeconomic background, personality, opinion, and cultural experience. Through collaborative engagement, students learned that moral character involves not only personal piety but also responsibility toward others. Values such as *ta'awun* (mutual assistance), *ukhuwah* (social solidarity), justice, compassion, and respect became visible through social practice(Al-Ghazali, 2024).

This finding broadens the understanding of Islamic character education. Religious morality cannot be reduced to individual ritual observance because Islamic ethical teachings also emphasize social responsibility. The results therefore support educational perspectives that define character as involving both personal virtues **and civic or relational responsibility (ayindania, 2021).**

3.6. Discussion: Toward an Integrative Model of Islamic Moral Education

The findings collectively answer the central research question concerning how contemporary Islamic education contributes to students' moral character development. The results indicate that moral character emerges through an integrated process rather than through religious instruction alone. Figure 1 presents the conceptual relationship identified across the three cases.

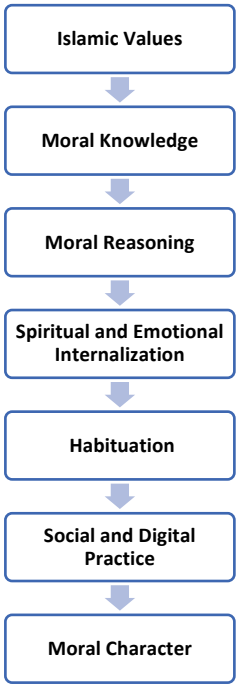


Figure 1. Integrative Process of Moral Character Development Through Contemporary Islamic Education

The model demonstrates that the process begins with Islamic normative values but does not end with knowledge acquisition. Values must be interpreted through reasoning, internalized through emotional and spiritual engagement, practiced repeatedly through habituation, and tested through authentic social and digital situations. The final outcome is the development of students who are increasingly capable of translating Islamic principles into responsible behavior.

The results are consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of integrating moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Berkowitz & Bier, 2024). However, the present findings add an important dimension by demonstrating the relevance of digital and social contexts to Islamic character formation. Contemporary students do not practice morality exclusively within conventional

school environments. Their ethical decisions increasingly occur across interconnected physical and digital spaces. Consequently, Islamic education must prepare students to carry moral principles across these environments.

The findings also provide a response to the debate between preserving religious norms and adapting Islamic education to contemporary realities. The evidence suggests that these two objectives do not necessarily contradict one another. Islamic moral principles can remain normative while their educational application becomes contextual, dialogical, experiential, and technologically aware. In other words, modernization does not require the abandonment of Islamic moral foundations; rather, it requires developing appropriate pedagogical strategies for enabling students to apply those foundations to new circumstances.

Another important implication concerns the role of educational institutions. Character development cannot be assigned exclusively to Islamic education teachers. It requires alignment among curriculum, teacher behavior, institutional policies, peer relationships, family engagement, and students' broader social environments. When these components communicate consistent moral expectations, students receive repeated opportunities to practice and reinforce ethical behavior.

Overall, the principal finding is that **contemporary Islamic education is most effective in developing moral character when it transforms Islamic values into lived, contextual, and socially meaningful experiences**. Religious knowledge remains essential, but it becomes transformative only when accompanied by reasoning, exemplary conduct, habituation, reflection, and authentic social participation. This finding strengthens the position of Islamic education as a holistic approach to character formation and suggests that future research should examine the proposed model across different cultural, institutional, and national contexts, particularly in relation to artificial intelligence, digital citizenship, and increasingly pluralistic educational environments

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that contemporary Islamic education contributes significantly to students' moral character development when Islamic values are transformed from normative knowledge into meaningful and continuous educational experiences. The findings demonstrate that moral character is not developed through religious instruction alone, but through the integration of moral knowledge, ethical reasoning, spiritual and emotional internalization, habituation, teacher modeling, institutional culture, and authentic social engagement. This integrative process enables students to understand moral principles, reflect on ethical dilemmas, develop internal commitment, and translate Islamic values into responsible behavior in everyday life. The study further reveals that contemporary Islamic education must respond to digital transformation and social diversity while maintaining its normative Islamic

foundations. Digital communication, social media, and changing patterns of interaction require students to apply values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, compassion, justice, and self-control within both physical and digital environments. The principal contribution of this study is therefore the development of an integrative perspective that connects Islamic values with moral reasoning, internalization, habituation, and social-digital practice. Practically, Islamic educational institutions should strengthen curriculum integration, teacher exemplarity, institutional culture, contextual learning, and digital moral literacy. Future research should examine this model through longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches involving diverse Islamic educational institutions and cultural contexts. Further studies should also investigate how artificial intelligence, social media, and emerging technologies influence students' Islamic moral reasoning and whether contemporary Islamic education can produce sustainable moral transformation over time.

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