

Implementation of Character Development for Boarding School Students Based on the Book *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* at the Darul Azhar Modern Islamic Boarding School in Southeast Aceh

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Abstract

This study examines moral character education, based on the book *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn*, at Darul Azhar Modern Islamic Boarding School, focusing on its pedagogical framework, day-to-day implementation, and the factors that shape its success. Using a qualitative approach with participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, the research finds that the book presents an organized framework that integrates cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions within a hierarchy encompassing both vertical relationships (with God) and horizontal ones (with other people). Its simple language, concrete examples, and gradual scaffolding suit adolescent development and current work in moral psychology. On the ground, the program runs through three overlapping channels: formal instruction, institutional habituation, and social control. Role-playing and dormitory routines prove especially effective. The findings also expose real tensions. Habituation dominates, and critical reflection is limited, so character formation rests more on habit than on deeply held belief. Most students show external regulation: they behave morally because someone is watching, and their conduct shifts across contexts. The study therefore argues for stronger, more structured reflection, less reliance on external control, and strategies that help students carry their moral commitments into settings that the pesantren cannot supervise.

Keywords: character education; *Kitab Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn*; pesantren; motivation.

Introduction

Digital technology has changed the ethical terrain adolescents grow up in. Empirical research keeps returning to the same findings: heavy digital media use is linked to reduced empathy,¹ higher aggression,² and weaker self-control.³ Berkowitz and Bier⁴ and Lickona and Davidson⁵ argue that this picture calls for serious engagement from scholars and educators with a more holistic approach to moral education, one that goes beyond cognitive instruction, takes affective development seriously, cultivates positive habits, and treats teacher behavior as a model for students to emulate.⁶ and makes use of a social environment that can sustain adolescent character over time.

Dhofier⁷ and Lukens-Bull⁸ argue that pesantren have long been central to moral teaching, pairing religious instruction with a depth of daily practice that few other institutions match. Among the classical texts used for moral pedagogy in pesantren, *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* by Umar bin Ahmad Baradja is one of the most important, offering practical guidance on respect for teachers, discipline, honesty, and social responsibility.⁹ At Darul Azhar Modern Islamic Boarding School in Southeast Aceh, the book anchors the moral curriculum: it is taught in class and reinforced through dormitory routines and teachers' day-to-day conduct. Early field observations, however, reveal inconsistencies in how students actually behave, especially in self-discipline, respect for others, and social

¹ Jean M Twenge and W Keith Campbell, "Associations between Screen Time and Lower Psychological Well-Being among Children and Adolescents: Evidence from a Population-Based Study," *Preventive Medicine Reports* 12 (2018): 271–83, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003>.

² Yalda T Uhls et al., "Five Days at Outdoor Education Camp without Screens Improves Preteen Skills with Nonverbal Emotion Cues," *Computers in Human Behavior* 39 (2014): 387–92.

³ Hye-Sun Lee and Jae Kwan Jun, "Role of Moral Disengagement and Media Literacy in the Relationships between Risky Online Content Exposure and Cyberaggression among Korean Adolescents," *Scientific Reports* 14, no. 1 (2024): 30877, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-81858-1>.

⁴ Marvin W Berkowitz and Melinda C Bier, "What Works in Character Education," *Journal of Research in Character Education* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2007).

⁵ Thomas Lickona, "Smart and Good High Schools; Integrating Excellence and Ethics for Success in School, Work, and Beyond," *A Report to the Nation on Character Education in High Schools*, 2005.

⁶ Wouter Sanderse, "Adolescents' Moral Self-Cultivation through Emulation: Implications for Modelling in Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 53, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 139–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2236314>.

⁷ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, "Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Kyai Dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia," (*No Title*), 2011.

⁸ Ronald A Lukens-Bull, "Two Sides of the Same Coin: Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Education in Indonesia," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (2001): 350–72.

⁹ Sofwan Manaf et al., "Strategic Integration of General and Religious Education in Indonesian Pesantren: Building Holistic Character for National Resilience," *Edcomtech: Jurnal Kajian Teknologi Pendidikan* 10, no. 2 SE-Articles (November 16, 2025): 133–46, <https://doi.org/10.17977/um039v10i22025p133-146>.

care, a gap that shows how hard it is to carry moral ideals from text into the lived routines of a pesantren.

Despite the growing body of work on character education in Islam, one area has remained underexplored: how classical texts are actually used within today's pesantren and how the day-to-day mechanisms of value transmission affect the depth to which those values are internalized. Most earlier research has focused either on textual content analysis or on broad descriptions of pedagogical practice, without systematically examining how institutional structures, teaching methods, and everyday interactions shape students' moral awareness. This is true, for instance, of the studies by Sarwadi and Raihan.¹⁰ and by Siswati, Abidin, and Zaldi.¹¹ These studies also tend to blur two distinct phenomena: behavioral compliance when students know they are being watched, and genuine internalization, in which values become part of how students think and act even when no one is supervising them.¹² The distinction is important. A pesantren can be very effective at fostering compliance and still fall short of cultivating the moral autonomy that sustains ethical behavior over time.

Kohlberg's stage theory helps frame this problem, since it draws a line between heteronomous morality, which rests on rewards and punishments, and autonomous morality, which grows out of internal principles.¹³ Self-determination theory operates along similar lines, tracing how values shift from external pressures to a person's authentic self.¹⁴ Islamic education describes the same movement in its own vocabulary through *tazkiyah al-nafs*: from *nafs al-ammarah* (the self driven by base desires) through *nafs al-lawwamah* (the conscience that feels remorse) to *nafs al-mutmainnah* (the soul at peace,

¹⁰ S Sarwadi and N Raihan, "Reinforcing Islamic Moral Values through Contemporary Pesantren Education," *Edukasi Islami: J*, no. November (2025): 1137–48, <https://doi.org/10.30868/ei.v14i04.9041>.

¹¹ Vialinda Siswati, Zainal Abidin, and Ahmad Zaldi, "Supporting Pesantren -Based Higher Education to Internalize Value Education Vialinda Siswati, 1* Zainal Abidin, 2 Ahmad Zaldi, 3" 6, no. December (2023): 207–22.

¹² Siswati, Abidin, and Zaldi, "Supporting Pesantren -Based Higher Education to Internalize Value Education Vialinda Siswati, 1* Zainal Abidin, 2 Ahmad Zaldi, 3."

¹³ Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development/2 The Psychology of Moral Development* (Harper & Row, 1984).

¹⁴ Edward L Deci and Richard M Ryan, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013).

reached once values are fully internalized).¹⁵ Studies by Sri Haryanto¹⁶ and Rohmadi¹⁷ suggest that when Qur'anic principles and the ethic of Islamic moderation are steadily woven into the life of contemporary pesantren, students internalize character and ethics more deeply, mainly through integrated teaching, day-to-day interaction, and an environment that supports those values. The broader literature points in the same direction: moral education has to go beyond behavioral conditioning if it is to produce genuine moral autonomy.

This study examines how moral instruction, based on *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn*, is implemented in the integrated life of a contemporary Islamic boarding school. Unlike earlier work, it does not stop at a general description of practice. It follows moral ideals through the channels by which they are transmitted: the formal curriculum, daily habits, the example teachers set, and the boarding system itself. That shift in focus opens a different view of how student character is formed, one in which institutional structure, teaching method, and personal moral growth are not separate concerns but parts of the same ongoing process.

This study has three main aims. The first is to read *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* closely and ask how those values are put into practice within the pesantren's integrated education system. The second is to examine the interplay between external habituation and internalization, with particular attention to the gap between behavioral compliance and genuine moral awareness. The third is to identify the structural and contextual factors that either facilitate or impede the shift from externally transmitted values to dispositions that a student can truly call his own.

The contribution to moral education lies in developing the idea of reflective internalization: the process through which values move from habits imposed from outside into dispositions a student holds through self-awareness and personal meaning. Alongside this, the study offers an empirical way to make sense of how the integrated moral system of a pesantren operates on the ground. The method is qualitative thematic analysis, which

¹⁵ Siti Mutholingah and Basri Zain, "Metode Penyucian Jiwa (Tazkiyah Al-Nafs) Dan Implikasinya Bagi Pendidikan Agama Islam," *TA'LIMUNA: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 1 (2021): 69–83.

¹⁶ Sri Haryanto, "Internalization of Islamic Boarding School Values in an Indonesian Islamic Educational Institution," *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 14, no. 4 (2022): 6371–80, <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v14i4.2099>.

¹⁷ Rohmadi, Duski Ibrahim, and Munir, "Model of Internalization of Religious Moderation Values in Salafiyah Boarding Schools," *Al-Hayat: Journal of Islamic Education* 8, no. 3 (2024): 950–65, <https://doi.org/10.35723/ajie.v8i3.574>.

traces the links between institutional design and individual moral experience and produces practical suggestions for pesantren administrators seeking to build character programs that can sustain students' moral autonomy beyond the reach of institutional supervision. The research also responds to a pressing problem in the field: the need for a model of character education that can withstand digital disruption and moral complexity, rooted in both theory and evidence, and tailored to Islamic education.

Research Method

This study examines moral education practices at a pesantren in Southeast Aceh through a qualitative case study drawing on *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn*. Fieldwork ran for about eight weeks, from 1 March to 25 June 2025, and focused on two things: the institution's daily routines and how students themselves lived through the process of making moral ideals their own.¹⁸

The pesantren chosen for this study is a boarding school that offers intensive religious education alongside the national curriculum and serves 450 middle school students. *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* is taught as a stand-alone subject and also built into the wider rhythm of boarding life. Eighteen participants were purposively selected: three institutional officials, four Al-Akhlāq teachers, three dormitory supervisors, and eight students (four boys, four girls) from different grade levels and diverse socioeconomic and participation backgrounds. All participants gave informed consent; for students under 18, parental consent was also obtained.

Data were gathered through three complementary methods to enable triangulation of findings. The first was participant observation.¹⁹ The researcher took a moderate participant role and observed 15 Al-Akhlāq class sessions across three grade levels, recording teaching techniques, student engagement, and classroom relational dynamics. Evening dormitory life was observed from 6:00 to 9:00 PM, with attention to religious routines, peer interactions, and supervisors' role handling. Nine communal activities were also observed to see how values were put into motion in group settings. Field notes followed a structured format with description, reflection, and early analytic thoughts, and

¹⁸ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Research and Research Design*, 2018,

¹⁹ Kathleen Musante and Billie R DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2010).

were transcribed within 12 hours to maintain accurate detail. A two-week immersion period before formal data collection helped reduce the observer effect.

*In-Depth Interviews.*²⁰ Semi-structured interviews lasted an average of 68 minutes, with individual sessions ranging from 50 to 90 minutes. Each protocol was tailored to the stakeholder group. The questions asked participants about their understanding of the aims of moral education and their approach to teaching it. They also asked how participants judged whether students had actually taken values on board, what it was like to try to live those values out, and where intrinsic commitments ran up against external expectations. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. Member checking with eight participants was used to confirm the interpretations. The document analysis drew on the *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* curriculum guide, the boarding school code of conduct, lesson plans, character assessment rubrics, and students' reflective notebooks. A directed content analysis approach was used to identify where formal policy and day-to-day practice matched and where they diverged.

The data were analyzed with Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, following its six iterative phases. After reading through the full dataset, the researcher conducted line-by-line coding in NVivo 12, generating 243 initial codes. These were then grouped into eighteen candidate themes and, through further review, narrowed down to eight final themes under three meta-themes: (1) the integrated moral education system, (2) the prevalence of external mechanisms in moral development, and (3) challenges in the internalization of values. A second analyst independently coded a quarter of the transcripts, giving an agreement rate of 84 percent. Where the two readings differed, the disagreements were discussed until the coders reached a common interpretation.²¹

Three kinds of triangulation were used to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Source triangulation set the views of different stakeholders against each other; methodological triangulation cross-checked interviews, observations, and documents; and investigator triangulation brought in independent coding. Spending more time in the field helped build trust with participants and reduce the observer effect. A thick contextual description is included so readers can decide for themselves how far the findings

²⁰ Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (sage, 2009).

²¹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

generalize to other settings. Reflexivity was handled through a journal the researcher kept throughout the study, especially given his position as a Muslim scholar of Islamic education with a background in pesantren, where assumptions and possible biases were worked through in writing.²²

Several limitations should be acknowledged. This is a single-case study at one pesantren with its own particular character, so direct generalization to other institutions is limited. The eight weeks spent in the field give a useful snapshot, but cannot capture how moral development unfolds over longer periods. Even with assurances of confidentiality, some responses may still have been influenced by social desirability bias. And because the study focuses on a single text within one teaching tradition, its conclusions may not carry over cleanly to pesantren that work from different books or use different instructional methods.

Discussion

Moral Values in the Book *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* as a Framework for Moral Education

Reading *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* by Umar bin Ahmad Baradja carefully shows how comprehensive its framework for moral education actually is. The book arranges moral values in a clear hierarchy. It begins with the vertical relationships a student is expected to cultivate with Allah SWT and the Prophet Muhammad SAW, then moves outward into the horizontal ones: parents, teachers, siblings, friends, and neighbors. From there, it works through the development of personal and social ethics. This ordering fits closely with current thinking on what makes character education work, which treats three dimensions as indispensable and as needing to operate together: knowing (moral knowledge), feeling (emotional commitment), and doing (moral action).²³

The book's ethical dimension toward Allah SWT emphasizes reverence (*ta'zīm*), love (*maḥabbah*), and gratitude (*shukr*) as the foundation of spiritual awareness. As explained in the book: "فَيَجِبُ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ تُعَظِّمَ رَبَّكَ وَحُبُّهُ وَتَشْكُرُهُ عَلَى جَمِيعِ نِعَمِهِ" (*You must glorify your Lord, love Him, and give thanks to Him for all the blessings He has bestowed*). This formulation encompasses the cognitive (knowledge of God), affective (feelings of love and gratitude), and conative (practices of worship) dimensions, implying that the internalization of

²² Norman K Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (Routledge, 2017).

²³ Sanderse, "Adolescents' Moral Self-Cultivation through Emulation: Implications for Modelling in Moral Education."

values necessitates more than the sheer transmission of cognitive knowledge. Dahl's research indicates that successful moral education must engage moral cognition, moral emotions, and moral behavior concurrently, as these three elements mutually reinforce one another in the process of internalizing values.²⁴

The book's emphasis on *birr al-wālidayn* as a practical expression of piety is evident in the care with which it treats a child's conduct toward parents, particularly the mother. The line "To comply with her commands with love and respect, and to do everything that brings joy to her heart" binds obedience to feeling, rather than reducing it to mechanical compliance. By turning the student's attention to what a parent actually experiences emotionally, the text cultivates empathy, which is what makes moral internalization possible in the first place. This aligns with theories of empathy-based moral development, which argue that inductive discipline that explains the emotional consequences of an action tends to produce deeper internalization of values than approaches based solely on authority or punishment.²⁵

The personal moral values taught honesty (*ṣidq*), discipline, responsibility, simplicity, and humility (*tawāḍuʿ*) form a moral character that is integrated into one's self-identity.²⁶ Textual formulations linking physical cleanliness to moral goodness ("نِظَافَةٌ" "النِّيَابِ وَالْبَدَنِ مِنْ حُسْنِ الْأَخْلَاقِ") indicate an understanding that character formation involves the habituation of concrete behaviors. Through repeated practices such as maintaining cleanliness, the book employs procedural learning mechanisms that foster 'moral automaticity,' the tendency to respond automatically to moral situations in accordance with internalized values.²⁷

The textbook fits the developmental level of Madrasah Tsanawiyah students (ages 12–15), in large part because of its design: its structure is orderly, its examples are drawn from everyday life, and its language is easy to follow. At this age, perspective-taking and empathy develop quickly, which helps students understand moral principles not just as

²⁴ Audun Dahl, "The Science of Early Moral Development: On Defining, Constructing, and Studying Morality from Birth," *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* 56 (2019): 1–35.

²⁵ Daniel Brugman, Kevin Van Der Meulen, and John C Gibbs, "Moral Judgment, Self-Serving Cognitive Distortions, and Peer Bullying among Secondary School Adolescents," *Journal of Moral Education* 53, no. 3 (2024): 412–32.

²⁶ Daniel Lapsley and Gustavo Carlo, "Moral Development at the Crossroads: New Trends and Possible Futures.," *Developmental Psychology* 50, no. 1 (2014): 1.

²⁷ Kristján Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education* (Routledge, 2015).

rules imposed from outside but as grounded in reasons and carrying emotional consequences for other people.²⁸ The textbook manages to hold together obedience to spiritual and social authority on one hand and the cultivation of inner dispositions on the other, and this reflects a real awareness that adolescents need to bring these two sources of moral guidance into working relation. Research by Hardy²⁹ and Tirri³⁰ supports the same idea: when transcendent commitment and autonomous reasoning are kept together rather than treated as alternatives, moral motivation is stronger and behavior more consistent across settings.

Read as a whole, the book builds connections that matter. It ties knowledge, emotion, and action together. It links compliance to empathy, and concrete practices to the more abstract dispositions those practices are meant to form. That kind of integration reflects a real understanding of how moral internalization works and aligns closely with current thinking in moral psychology and character education. The fact that the book also suits adolescent students at their developmental stage is a reminder that classical wisdom still has substantial contributions to make to character education today.

Implementation of Moral Character Formation: An Integrated Moral Education System

At Darul Azhar Modern Islamic Boarding School, character is formed through an integrated moral education system that pulls together formal instruction, institutional socialization, and social control. The boarding school structure is what holds these pieces in place day to day, and *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* supplies the content they work with. This way of joining things up fits the holistic framework of character education, which argues that the explicit curriculum, the wider culture of the school, and the teacher's actual classroom practice cannot really be treated as separate instruments; they have to reinforce one another.³¹

²⁸ Jolien Van der Graaff et al., "Perspective Taking and Empathic Concern in Adolescence: Gender Differences in Developmental Changes.," *Developmental Psychology* 50, no. 3 (2014): 881.

²⁹ Sam A Hardy, Dallas S Bean, and Joseph A Olsen, "Moral Identity and Adolescent Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviors: Interactions with Moral Disengagement and Self-Regulation," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 44, no. 8 (2015): 1542–54.

³⁰ Kirsi Tirri and Brandy Quinn, "10 Exploring the Role of Religion and Spirituality in the Development of Purpose," *The Empirical Science of Religious Education*, 2016, 126.

³¹ Berkowitz and Bier, "What Works in Character Education."

The school treats moral education as central: *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* is a required course. The Head of the Curriculum Division put it this way: "The book doesn't just explain ethical theories, it gives students concrete behavioral examples they can apply in everyday life." That approach aligns with Wenger and Trayner's concept of situated learning and with Troy D. Sadler's argument that real learning occurs when knowledge is tied to meaningful social practice.

The curriculum sets learning objectives in three areas: cognitive (understanding ethical concepts), affective (internalizing values), and psychomotor (practicing proper etiquette). The point isn't just to transfer knowledge. As one ustadz said, "What matters more is how students apply these moral values in their lives." Whether a student actually behaves differently is the real measure of whether the teaching has taken hold. Studies of moral development make a similar point: understanding a principle and acting on it consistently are two different things, and only the second one counts.³²

The curriculum starts with personal and family ethics at the introductory level, then moves to social ethics at the advanced level. That order isn't accidental; it aligns with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and the general principle of scaffolding. The idea is that students handle moral complexity better when they start with the relationships right in front of them (family) before working outward to something as abstract as "society."

The teaching methods vary: lectures, group discussions, role-playing, case studies, and Q&A. Which one gets used depends on the material. Role-playing is particularly useful for topics like honesty or social ethics, where students need actually to sit with a dilemma rather than read about one. Anchoring the textbook in the students' own boarding school life seems to help, too. One student put it this way: "I like the role-playing because it helps me understand how to behave. Respecting teachers has a lot of sides to it." That's the kind of thing experiential learning is supposed to produce, not a definition of a virtue, but a working sense of what it actually looks like.

Reflection activities at the end of a lesson, such as "How will you apply this lesson in your daily life?" draw on metacognitive awareness, which Cleary and colleagues treat as a key element of moral development. The point of reflection is to set up a small amount

³² Haining Wang and Guangzhen Zong, "Relationship between Employees' Perceived Illegitimate Tasks and Their Work Procrastination Behavior: Role of Negative Emotions and Paternalistic Dimensions," *Heliyon* 9, no. 4 (2023).

of cognitive dissonance. That dissonance is what makes students notice the gap between what they've been taught and how they actually behave.

A lot of moral formation happens outside the classroom, in the dormitory. A day that begins with communal *Subuh* prayer and moves through Quranic study, structured activities, and an evening self-check builds habits by shaping when, where, and how things happen. This kind of controlled environment with steady routines is generally thought to make it easier for adolescents to absorb values — not because anyone lectures them more, but because the daily schedule quietly does the teaching. Syifa Fauziah makes a related point about the dormitory's cleaning rota, table manners, and rules for how students treat each other: these are micro-practices that work through repetition rather than explanation.³³

This kind of habituation lines up with virtue ethics, where moral dispositions are formed through repeated practice, what Aristotle called *hexis*, until they become second nature.³⁴ Berkowitz's work goes further. His findings suggest that habituating concrete moral behaviors not only shapes what students do but also changes the cognitive and emotional patterns underlying the behavior.³⁵ You can see this in students who start out brushing their teeth or greeting their elders because the rules require it, and then, at some point, no longer need the rules. The limitation shows up in the students on the other end of that process. Some of them never get past the mechanical stage. They perform the practices on schedule, correctly, and with no particular sense of why. The habit is there; the understanding that the habit was supposed to carry along with it isn't.

A consistent reward-and-punishment mechanism is implemented to address violations and reinforce positive behavior. A system of cumulative infraction points resulting in tiered consequences, from verbal reprimands to parental summons, exemplifies consequence-based discipline. Nevertheless, research by Ryan & Deci and Joussemet suggests that an approach overly dependent on external control can impede the

³³ Syifa Fauziah et al., "Implementation of Character Education for Early Childhood through Habituation and Role Modeling at TK Mujahidin, Semarang Regency," *Proceeding International Collaborative Conference on Multidisciplinary Science* 2, no. 2 SE-Articles (August 19, 2025): 313–21, <https://doi.org/10.70062/iccms.v2i2.168>.

³⁴ Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education*.

³⁵ Berkowitz and Bier, "What Works in Character Education."

development of autonomous moral motivation.³⁶ Observational findings indicate a dependence on external control: pupils demonstrate compliance under monitoring but display altered conduct as oversight diminishes, suggesting incomplete internalization of values. Conduct remains influenced by external regulation rather than intrinsic incentive.

Integrative Moral Pedagogy in Modern Islamic Boarding Schools: An Analysis of the Implementation of the Book *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* and Factors Influencing Its Effectiveness

Whether the character-formation program at Darul Azhar actually works for a given student depends on many factors. The pesantren has to run the program well. The family and community at home have to back it up. And the student themselves brings religious awareness, motivation, and self-control, or doesn't, to varying degrees. Students who already care about their religion and are genuinely interested in learning tend to internalize its values deeply. The ones who are there mainly because their parents made them go or because they don't want to get in trouble usually behave well without really buying into it. Home life makes a big difference, too. A student from a religious family hears the same thing at the pesantren that they've been hearing since they were small, and it tends to stick. A student whose family holds different values is essentially being asked to live inside a contradiction, and you can see that in the outcomes.

Where students are in their cognitive and socio-emotional development also makes a big difference. During the Madrasah Tsanawiyah years, roughly ages twelve to fifteen, perspective-taking and empathy develop quickly. Students at this age start to see moral rules not just as orders handed down from above, but as things with reasons behind them and emotional consequences attached.³⁷ This is also when moral identity starts to form, the slow process by which moral values become part of how a student sees themselves. That integration is one of the strongest predictors of whether moral behavior will hold up over the long term. The catch is that students in this age bracket don't all develop at the same pace, and the current teaching methods aren't really set up to meet students at different stages of moral maturity.

³⁶ Richard M Ryan and Edward L Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation from a Self-Determination Theory Perspective: Definitions, Theory, Practices, and Future Directions," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 61 (2020): 101860.

³⁷ Doran C French et al., "Parent- Adolescent Relationships, Religiosity, and the Social Adjustment of Indonesian Muslim Adolescents.," *Journal of Family Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2013): 421.

How well the pesantren's value system actually lands with students depends on the teaching skill of the ustadz, how consistently the rules are enforced, and the culture of the pesantren itself. Teachers who vary their methods, draw on personal experience as a form of modeling, and push students toward genuine reflection tend to have more influence on character formation. Observations from the field point to the same thing: teachers who build emotional rapport with students and personally embody the expected conduct, the ideal of *Uswah Hasanah*, produce stronger internalization of values. This fits Bandura's social cognitive theory of learning, which treats modeling as central to moral education.³⁸ The weak point is time. Structured reflection and guided self-examination are squeezed into the margins of the schedule, and without that space, moral reasoning tends to stay shallow. Inconsistent enforcement makes it worse. When students see the same behavior tolerated in one case and punished in another, the rules lose legitimacy, and the actual standard becomes hard to read.

Digital media and popular culture complicate all of this. Even with restricted internet access inside the pesantren, students still reach outside content through visitors' phones, trips home, and informal workarounds, and what they find there often contradicts pesantren norms. A few students manage to hold both worlds together in what Hefner calls "cosmopolitan Islam," blending traditional religious commitments with a more modern outlook. Others never reconcile the two. Some live with a persistent identity conflict; others settle into a kind of double morality, behaving as expected inside the pesantren without fully taking those expectations to heart.³⁹

Cooperative parental support fosters a family-school partnership, a key factor in the success of character education.⁴⁰ Regular contact between the pesantren and parents, through communication journals and periodic meetings, helps students carry the same values across home and school. This only works when a family's values already align with the pesantren's. The boarding arrangement matters here, too. Because students live and study together for long stretches, the peer group itself begins to function as a moral

³⁸ Albert Bandura, "Toward a Psychology of Human Agency: Pathways and Reflections," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13, no. 2 (2018): 130–36.

³⁹ R W Hefner, "Islamic Education, Social Change, and Reform in Indonesia BT - Making Modern Muslims" (University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824872113-008>.

⁴⁰ Xiaodi Jiang and Ren Liu, "Factors Influencing School Climate: An Empirical Study Based on the TALIS Principal Survey," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (2024): 722, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03203-1>.

community, and values are reinforced through daily interactions and shared expectations about how one ought to behave.⁴¹ The observation that “students remind one another if a friend violates the rules” indicates *peer monitoring* that can support internalization if grounded in a collective commitment to values, rather than mere pressure to conform.

The Complexity of Moral Internalization: A Theoretical Synthesis

The findings show that moral formation is a complex process, and making sense of it requires drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks. Two mechanisms carry most of the weight: habituation through repeated practice, and reflection prompted by moral discourse. The pesantren uses both, but habituation clearly dominates. Students get plenty of repetition and very little encouragement toward deeper contemplation, which produces character built mostly on habit rather than on conviction. Self-determination theory offers a useful way to read this.⁴² The theory describes a continuum running from external regulation, where behavior is driven by punishment or reward, to integrated regulation, where behavior aligns with the person's own sense of self. Most students in this study seem to sit at the external and introjected end: they behave appropriately largely because someone is watching, or because they want to avoid embarrassment, rather than out of a personal commitment to the values themselves.⁴³

One finding raises a real question about how stable moral character actually is: students who follow the rules carefully while in the pesantren but break the same norms once they return home. Person-situation interactionism offers a more useful reading of this. The inconsistency is not a sign that moral character is absent; it is a sign that moral dispositions remain fragile and depend on a supportive environment to emerge. That has a clear implication. If the goal is a character that holds up across different settings, then tightly controlling the situation is not enough. Students need to be explicitly prepared to carry their values into environments that will not support them, and the principle of moral self-regulation leads to the same conclusion: the drive must become internal.

⁴¹ Georgianne Tiu Hawkins et al., “The School Environment and Physical and Social-Emotional Well-Being: Implications for Students and School Employees,” *Journal of School Health* 93, no. 9 (September 1, 2023): 799–812, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13375>.

⁴² Ryan and Deci, “Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation from a Self-Determination Theory Perspective: Definitions, Theory, Practices, and Future Directions.”

⁴³ Sonja Bieg et al., “Exploring the Complexity of Introjected Regulation in Self-Determination Theory,” *International Journal of Teaching and Learning Sciences*, 2024, 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.47991/2024/IJTLS-125>.

The tension between traditional pesantren values and the pull of secular modernity reflects a broader debate within contemporary Islamic education. Modern Darul Azhar Islamic Boarding School is one example of a hybrid model that combines the national secular curriculum with traditional religious instruction, creating ambiguity about what the institution actually prioritizes. The schedule allocates 57 percent of class time to formal subjects and 43 percent to religious and moral instruction, creating a structural gap between what the pesantren says it values and what its calendar shows. Students caught between pesantren values and global media, or between pesantren expectations and the expectations at home, are living out the hybridity that many contemporary Indonesian Muslims know firsthand. Character education in this context has to take the socio-cultural reality of adolescents in the digital era seriously.

One finding raises a real question about how stable moral character actually is: students who follow the rules carefully inside the pesantren, but break the same norms once they return home. Person-situation interactionism reads this differently. The inconsistency is not a sign that moral character is absent; it is a sign that moral dispositions remain fragile and depend on a supportive environment to show up. That has a clear implication. If the goal is a character that holds across different settings, then tightly controlling the situation is not enough. Students need to be explicitly prepared to carry their values into environments that will not support them, which is what the principle of moral self-regulation points to.

The tension between traditional pesantren values and secular modernity reflects a broader debate within contemporary Islamic education. Modern Darul Azhar Islamic Boarding School is one example of a hybrid model, combining the national secular curriculum with traditional religious instruction, resulting in ambiguity about what the institution is actually prioritizing. The schedule allocates 57 percent of class time to formal subjects and 43 percent to religious and moral instruction, creating a structural gap between what the pesantren says it values and what its calendar shows. Students caught between pesantren values and global media, or between pesantren expectations and those they encounter at home, experience this hybridity directly, as many contemporary Indonesian Muslims do. Character education in this setting has to take the socio-cultural reality of adolescents in the digital era seriously.

Conclusion

The Kitab *Al-Akhlāq Lil-Banīn* lays out a structured approach to moral education. It addresses students' understanding, their feelings, and the choices they make, and it orders the moral life in a clear hierarchy that covers duties to God alongside duties to other people. The text teaches gradually, using examples drawn from everyday situations, and much of this lines up with what modern moral psychology says about how character actually develops in young people.

At Modern Darul Azhar Islamic Boarding School, teaching runs through classroom instruction, the routines of pesantren life, and the rules governing student conduct. The school draws on a range of methods, but habituation does most of the work. Critical reflection gets far less room. The result is that students form moral habits mainly under supervision. They behave well when watched and tend to slip when they are not, which is the clearest sign that the character being formed is still fragile and leans on external pressure to hold up. The problem gets harder once pesantren values come up against digital media, because students there encounter ideas that the school's traditional approach was not built to handle. A few changes would help. The school could work more structured reflection into daily practice, ease back on control-based discipline, and give students chances to apply their values in settings outside the pesantren. Passing down tradition matters, but it is not enough on its own. Students also need to learn to act on their own moral judgment, especially once they are no longer in the environment that shaped them.

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