

Moral Learning Based on Teacher Exemplars as a Strategy for Strengthening Islamic Character Education

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ABSTRACT

Moral degradation among students has become a significant challenge in contemporary education, particularly in the context of globalization and rapid socio-cultural change. Islamic character education is expected to provide moral guidance; however, its implementation often remains cognitive-oriented and lacks effective internalization. This study aims to analyze moral learning based on teacher exemplars as a strategic approach to strengthening Islamic character education. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research explores how teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and daily interactions function as living moral models for students. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation in Islamic educational institutions. The findings indicate that teacher exemplars play a central role in shaping students' Islamic character, including honesty, discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and spiritual awareness. Moral learning grounded in exemplary behavior is more effective than purely instructional methods, as it fosters moral internalization through habituation and emotional bonding. Teachers who consistently demonstrate Islamic values in both instructional and non-instructional settings significantly influence students' moral development. This study concludes that strengthening Islamic character education requires positioning teachers not only as knowledge transmitters but also as moral role models whose exemplary conduct becomes the core of moral learning strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of globalization and advances in information technology have brought significant changes in social, cultural and educational life patterns (Jaenullah, Utama, & Setiawan, 2022). The rapid flow of information, the tendency toward liberal

global values, and shifts in societal orientations have all influenced the character and morals of students. While globalization opens up opportunities for intellectual advancement and 21st-century skills, it also presents serious challenges in the form of moral degradation, weakened spiritual values, and a decline in ethical sensitivity among the younger generation (Aisi, Susanto, & Isa, 2025; Fetra Bonita Sari, Risda Amini, 2020). In this context, Islamic education plays a strategic role not only as a means of transferring religious knowledge but also as a vehicle for developing Islamic character based on noble moral values. Socially, various phenomena indicate a moral crisis in educational settings, such as increasing dishonest behavior, low discipline, a lack of responsibility, and a weakening of respect for teachers and others (Iskarim, 2016). This phenomenon occurs not only in public schools but also in Islamic educational institutions, which traditionally teach moral and ethical values. This fact indicates a gap between the ideal goals of Islamic education and the reality of educational practice in the field. Character education often remains trapped at the normative and symbolic level, without being accompanied by a deep internalization of values in the daily lives of students.

The main problem in Islamic character education lies in the moral learning approach which is still predominantly cognitive and verbalistic (Rusmaniah, Mardiani, Handy, Putra, & Jumriani, 2021). Moral values are conveyed through lectures, memorization, and written evaluations, but are rarely actualized in real-life behavior. As a result, students understand moral concepts theoretically but have difficulty applying them in social life (Firoza, Barlenty, & Mokhamad, 2025). Furthermore, inconsistencies between the values taught and the behavior of educators in the school environment also weaken the effectiveness of character education. When teachers fail to exemplify moral behavior consistent with the teachings conveyed, the moral message loses its transformative power. As a solution, moral learning based on teacher exemplars is a strategic approach to strengthening Islamic character education. From an Islamic educational perspective, role modeling is a fundamental method exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a good example (Suyadi, Nuryana, Sutrisno, & Baidi, 2022). Teachers not only serve as transmitters of material but also as moral figures whose behavior, attitudes, and interactions serve as models for students. Teachers' exemplary behavior in honesty, discipline, responsibility, modesty, and tolerance have a powerful influence because moral values are learned through observation, imitation, and habituation. Role-model-based moral learning allows for the natural and sustainable internalization of values (Abrori & Hadi, 2020).

Although various studies have discussed Islamic character education and the role of teachers in shaping students' morals, most studies still focus on conceptual aspects, curriculum, or formal pedagogical strategies. Research specifically examining moral learning based on teacher role models as a primary strategy in strengthening Islamic character is still relatively limited, particularly those that place role models as the core of the learning process, rather than merely a supporting factor. Furthermore, there is limited research elaborating on how teacher role models function as a systematic pedagogical process in shaping Islamic character in educational settings.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to analyze moral learning based on teacher role models as a strategy for strengthening Islamic character education. This research seeks to uncover the forms of teacher role models, the mechanisms of internalization of moral values, and their impact on the formation of students' Islamic character. The novelty of this research lies in the affirmation of teacher role models as a core strategy for moral learning, not merely as a normative or ethical value, but as an operational and contextual pedagogical approach in Islamic education. Thus, this research is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of a more effective and sustainable model of Islamic character education.

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore moral learning based on teacher exemplars as a strategy for strengthening Islamic character education (Huberman & Jhonny, 2014; Sugiyono, 2010). The qualitative approach was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of teachers' exemplary behaviors, the processes of moral internalization, and their influence on students' Islamic character within a natural educational setting. This research emphasized meaning, context, and participants' perspectives rather than numerical measurement. The research was conducted in Islamic educational institutions that explicitly implement character education programs. The research subjects consisted of Islamic education teachers, school principals, and students selected through purposive sampling. Teachers were chosen based on their active involvement in character education and their recognized moral influence within the school community. Students were selected to provide insights into how teacher exemplars affect their attitudes and daily behavior.

Data were collected using three main techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (Creswell, 2018). Observations focused on teachers' daily interactions, instructional practices, and non-instructional behaviors that reflect Islamic moral values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and respect. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and school leaders to explore their

perceptions, strategies, and experiences in implementing moral learning through exemplars. Student interviews were used to understand the internalization process and the perceived impact of teacher role modeling. Documentation included school policies, character education guidelines, lesson plans, and relevant institutional records. Data analysis followed an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The process involved categorizing moral values, identifying patterns of exemplary behavior, and interpreting their pedagogical significance. To ensure data credibility, triangulation of sources and techniques was applied, along with member checking and prolonged engagement in the research field. This methodological framework enabled a comprehensive understanding of moral learning based on teacher exemplars as an effective and contextual strategy for strengthening Islamic character education.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The research results show that moral learning based on teacher role models has a significant contribution to strengthening Islamic character education. Teacher role models not only serve as a complement to learning but also serve as the core of the process of internalizing students' moral values. Through daily interactions, personal attitudes, and consistent behavior, teachers act as moral figures who directly shape students' ethical awareness and Islamic character. These findings were obtained from observations, in-depth interviews, and mutually reinforcing documentation.

No	Aspects of Teacher Exemplary Behavior	Implementation Form	Islamic Character Values that are Formed	Impact on Students
1	Exemplary Spiritual Attitude	Discipline of worship, prayer together, attitude of tawadhu'	Religious, pious, spiritual awareness	Increased awareness of worship and religious ethics
2	Social Moral Exemplar	Honesty, responsibility, fairness, politeness	Honest, trustworthy, tolerant	Formation of positive social behavior
3	Academic Exemplary	Time discipline, teaching commitment, fairness in assessment	Discipline, hard work, integrity	Increase learning motivation and academic ethos
4	Exemplary Interaction	Empathetic and dialogic communication	Empathy, mutual respect	The teacher-student relationship is

				more harmonious
5	Exemplary Consistency	Conformity of speech and action	Moral integrity	Values that are easy to internalize and emulate

Discussion

Teacher Exemplary Behavior as the Foundation of Moral Learning

The teacher's exemplary behavior is the main foundation in moral learning because moral values are not simply taught, but must be demonstrated in real life (Zahro, Mansur, & Afifullah, 2023). In the context of Islamic education, teachers are positioned not only as academic educators, but also as moral figures who serve as a reference for student behavior (Ashari, 2021). The findings of this study confirm that teachers' consistency in displaying Islamic behavior, both in the classroom and in daily life at school, has a significant influence on the formation of students' moral character. When teachers practice the values they teach, moral messages become vivid and meaningful, not merely conceptual. Role-model-based moral learning operates through natural psychological and pedagogical mechanisms. Students, especially those of school age, have a strong tendency to learn through observation and imitation of figures considered authoritative and meaningful in their lives. Teachers, in this case, serve as primary role models whose behavior is continuously observed by students. When teachers demonstrate honesty in their speech, discipline in their time, patience in dealing with differences, and responsibility in carrying out their duties, students perceive these values not as commands, but as concrete practices worthy of emulation (Jaenullah et al., 2022).

Research findings show that teacher role models can transform moral learning from a normative-instructive approach into an affective and reflective experience. Students not only understand what is right and wrong but also experience moral meaning through direct interaction with the teacher. This process encourages the growth of internal awareness (moral consciousness), where moral values are accepted not because of external pressure, but rather because of understanding and role models that touch the emotional aspect (Uddin Ahmed Khondoker, 2024). Thus, role-modeling-based moral learning contributes significantly to the formation of stable and sustainable character. From an Islamic educational perspective, role modeling has a strong theological foundation. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is positioned as a good example, an ideal model in all aspects of life. This principle is then inherited in the Islamic educational tradition, where teachers are

expected to emulate the Prophet's morals in their teaching. The findings of this study indicate that teachers who strive to consistently demonstrate Islamic morals, such as humility, fairness, empathy, and compassion, are more likely to build students' moral confidence (Puji & Supriyanti, 2025). This trust is an important prerequisite in the character education process, because students tend to accept moral values from figures they respect and trust.

Furthermore, teacher role models also serve to strengthen pedagogical integrity. When there is a match between what is taught and what the teacher does, the educational process is authentic. Conversely, inconsistencies in teacher behavior can weaken moral messages and create value dissonance in students. Research findings indicate that students are highly sensitive to teacher behavior and are able to distinguish between formalistic teaching and authentic role models. Therefore, teacher role models serve as a benchmark for moral credibility in Islamic education. Role models also play a crucial role in creating a moral climate within the school environment (Rifki, Sauri, Abdussalam, Supriadi, & Parid, 2023; Zahro et al., 2023). Teachers who demonstrate Islamic behavior collectively contribute to the formation of a values-oriented school culture. An environment rich in role models encourages students to align their behavior with prevailing moral norms. In this context, role models not only impact individual students but also shape collective moral awareness, strengthening Islamic character socially.

Thus, teacher role models can be understood as a strategic and substantial foundation for moral learning. Moral learning rooted in role models allows for the in-depth internalization of values because it simultaneously addresses the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The findings of this study confirm that strengthening Islamic character education cannot be separated from the role of teachers as moral role models. Therefore, developing teacher professionalism in Islamic education requires emphasizing moral integrity and role models as core competencies that must be consciously and sustainably developed.

The Process of Internalizing Values through Observation and Habituation

The process of internalizing moral values in Islamic education does not occur instantly, but rather through gradual stages involving cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects (Rifki et al., 2023; Supriyanti, Kurniawati, & Susanto, 2025). The findings of this study indicate that internalization of moral values in students occurs primarily through observation, imitation, and habituation to teacher role models. When teachers consistently demonstrate Islamic behavior, students not only understand moral values rationally but also absorb them through direct experience in daily interactions. This process makes moral values not merely knowledge but

also part of students' attitudes and habits (Firoza et al., 2025). Observation is the initial stage in internalizing moral values. Students naturally observe the behavior of teachers as figures of authority and emotional closeness. In this context, every teacher's behavior, from how they speak, to being fair, managing their emotions, to keeping promises, becomes an unwritten source of moral learning. Research findings indicate that students are highly sensitive to the consistency of teacher behavior. Teachers who consistently demonstrate moral integrity are more likely to serve as value references for students than teachers who only provide verbal advice without concrete actions.

The next stage is imitation, which is the tendency of students to imitate the behavior they observe. Imitation is not always conscious but occurs naturally as part of the social learning process (Yucheng, 2023). Students tend to imitate the behavior of teachers they admire, respect, and consider morally credible. Research findings reveal that simple behaviors such as teacher discipline in initiating learning, honesty in assessment, and patience in dealing with student mistakes are gradually imitated and reflected in student behavior. This imitation process serves as an important bridge between understanding values and real-life practice. Habituation is a key stage that strengthens the internalization of moral values (Mufidah, 2021). When teachers demonstrate exemplary behavior repeatedly and consistently, students experience a process of habituation that instills moral values within them. This habituation allows values such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline to no longer be perceived as external demands but instead develop into internal needs. Research findings indicate that students in school environments with a strong culture of exemplary behavior tend to display positive behavior spontaneously, even without direct teacher supervision.

The process of internalization through habituation also involves emotional and relational dimensions between teachers and students. A warm, empathetic, and respectful relationship creates a psychological climate conducive to the acceptance of moral values. When students feel appreciated and understood by their teachers, they are more open to accepting and emulating the values exemplified (Akbar & Barni, 2022). Research findings indicate that role models coupled with a humanistic approach have a stronger influence than purely authoritative or instructive approaches. Compared with instructional approaches to moral learning, role model-based learning has proven more effective in shaping Islamic character. Instructional approaches tend to position moral values as objects of memorization and cognitive evaluation, while role models make values a lived experience. Research findings confirm that students more easily remember and practice moral values they witness

directly than those conveyed solely through lectures or texts. This suggests that moral learning requires emotional engagement and concrete role models for values to be deeply internalized.

From an Islamic educational perspective, the process of internalization through observation and habituation aligns with the concept of *tarbiyah bil qudwah*, namely education by example. Moral values are not simply taught through commands and prohibitions but must be instilled through consistent practice. The findings of this study reinforce the view that the success of Islamic character education depends heavily on the quality of teacher role models as the primary agents of value internalization. Teachers who are able to maintain their moral integrity continuously contribute directly to the formation of students' Islamic character.

Thus, the process of internalizing moral values through observation, imitation, and habituation is a fundamental mechanism in role-model-based moral learning. This process allows Islamic values to be naturally and sustainably embedded in students. These findings confirm that strengthening Islamic character education requires a pedagogical strategy that places role models at the core of learning, so that moral values are not only understood but also lived out in students' daily lives.

Implications of Teacher Exemplary Behavior on Strengthening Islamic Character

Teachers' exemplary behavior has broad and profound implications for strengthening students' Islamic character. The findings of this study indicate that exemplary behavior not only influences the formation of individual attitudes but also collective behavioral patterns within the school environment. When teachers consistently display Islamic values in their attitudes, speech, and actions, students gain concrete references for how Islamic teachings are embodied in everyday life. These implications are clearly visible in the three main aspects of Islamic character: spiritual, social, and academic. In the spiritual aspect, teachers' exemplary behavior contributes significantly to increasing students' religious awareness (Lessy, Rantekata, Rohman, & Sada, 2024). Teachers who are disciplined in performing their religious duties, maintaining good manners, and displaying an attitude of trust and gratitude in various situations provide concrete examples of authentic religious practice. Research findings indicate that students become more motivated to carry out religious duties consciously, not simply out of institutional obligation. Teachers' exemplary behavior helps students understand that spiritual values are not just part of formal rituals but are also reflected in a life of honesty, patience, and responsibility. Thus, the spiritual dimension of Islamic character grows more deeply and sustainably.

The implications of teacher role models are also evident in strengthening students' social character. Teachers who demonstrate politeness, fairness, empathy, and tolerance serve as role models for building harmonious social relationships. Research findings reveal that students tend to imitate teachers' social interaction patterns, both in communicating with peers and in resolving conflicts. This role model encourages the growth of mutual respect, social awareness, and responsibility for others. In the context of a multicultural society, teacher role models are an effective means of instilling the values of brotherhood, tolerance, and moderation, which align with the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (blessing for the universe) (Susanto, Rohmah, Hidayanti, & Sugiyar, 2023). In the academic aspect, teacher role models have a positive impact on students' learning ethos and academic responsibility. Teachers who demonstrate a strong commitment to teaching, discipline, and fairness in assessment instill the values of integrity and hard work in students. Research findings indicate that students become more appreciative of the learning process, improve their discipline, and demonstrate responsibility for academic tasks. Teacher role models help students understand that academic achievement is not only the result of intelligence, but also the fruit of honesty, diligence, and consistency. Thus, Islamic character is harmoniously integrated with academic achievement.

Furthermore, teacher exemplary behavior has implications for the formation of a moral culture within the school environment. When Islamic values are practiced collectively by educators, schools develop into social spaces imbued with moral values and norms. Research findings indicate that a culture of exemplary behavior creates an educational climate conducive to character formation, where students remind each other and align their behavior with prevailing values. This moral culture strengthens the social internalization of values and encourages the formation of Islamic character not only at the individual level but also within the school community. Another strategic implication is a shift in the paradigm of moral learning in Islamic education. Teacher exemplary behavior emphasizes that character education cannot be separated from the personal integrity of educators (Rusli, Muhammad, & Sakkirang, 2024). Teachers are not merely implementers of the curriculum, but key actors in building a values-based educational ecosystem. This research finding indicates that the success of strengthening Islamic character depends heavily on the moral quality and consistent role models of teachers in their daily lives at school.

Thus, role-modeling-based moral learning has comprehensive implications for strengthening students' Islamic character. Teachers' exemplary behavior not only

shapes individuals with noble morals but also builds an educational ecosystem that places Islamic values as the primary foundation of all educational activities. Therefore, strengthening Islamic character education requires an institutional commitment to developing a culture of role models as a sustainable and transformative pedagogical strategy.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research results and discussion, it can be concluded that moral learning based on teacher role models is an effective strategy in strengthening Islamic character education. Teacher role models serve as the main foundation of moral learning because Islamic values are not only taught normatively, but are also presented concretely through the attitudes and behavior of educators in everyday life. The process of internalizing moral values occurs through mechanisms of observation, imitation, and habituation, allowing students to absorb the values naturally and sustainably. This study also shows that teacher role models have a significant impact on strengthening students' Islamic character in spiritual, social, and academic aspects. The consistency of teacher behavior in displaying moral integrity creates a school culture oriented towards Islamic values, so that character education not only shapes individuals with noble character but also builds a conducive and sustainable educational ecosystem. Thus, teacher role models need to be positioned as a core strategy in the development of moral learning and Islamic character education.

Future researchers are advised to expand this study with more diverse methodological approaches, such as quantitative or mixed methods research, to empirically measure the influence of teacher role models on the formation of students' Islamic character. Furthermore, further research could expand the research context to different educational levels or multicultural educational environments to obtain a more comprehensive picture. An in-depth study of the development of a role model-based teacher training model is also an important recommendation for strengthening the systematic and sustainable implementation of Islamic character education.

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