

Beyond Character Education Programs How School Culture Shapes Students' Moral and Social Responsibility in Islamic Secondary Schools

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Abstract: Character education in Islamic secondary schools is often implemented through formal programs, religious activities, and disciplinary practices, yet the presence of such programs does not necessarily ensure the internalization of moral values in students' everyday behavior. This qualitative case study examines how school culture shapes students' moral and social responsibility through institutional norms, teacher modeling, religious routines, habituation, peer interaction, and everyday school experiences. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students, observations of classroom and school activities, and analysis of relevant institutional documents. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data, supported by source and methodological triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. The findings indicate that character formation is embedded in everyday school culture through consistent norms, religious routines, disciplinary practices, and repeated opportunities to practice responsibility. Teachers function as moral models whose fairness, consistency, respectful communication, and guidance strengthen the credibility of institutional values. Peer relationships and collective activities further reinforce moral expectations and create opportunities for cooperation and empathy. School culture contributes to students' social responsibility by supporting self-regulation, responsibility, empathy, cooperation, community participation, moral decision-making, and student leadership. The study proposes a School Culture-Based Character Formation Model in which institutional norms, teacher modeling, and religious routines shape everyday student experiences, facilitate value habituation and internalization, and support moral and social responsibility.

Keywords: School Culture, Character Education, Moral Responsibility, Social Responsibility, Islamic Secondary Schools, Teacher Modeling

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary education faces a growing challenge in developing students who are not only academically competent but also capable of demonstrating moral integrity and social responsibility in everyday life. Rapid social change, digital interaction, cultural diversity, and increasing exposure to competing value systems have made character formation more complex than the transmission of moral principles through classroom instruction. Character education is therefore increasingly understood as a multidimensional process involving moral understanding, emotional development, behavioral practice, and participation in social life (Berkowitz et al., 2008; Kristjánsson, 2015). In this context, schools are expected to provide learning environments in

which values such as responsibility, respect, honesty, empathy, cooperation, and justice are not merely taught but experienced and practiced continuously. The challenge, however, is that formal character education does not automatically translate into consistent student behavior. The effectiveness of character education depends substantially on whether the values promoted by schools are reflected in the everyday relationships, institutional practices, and cultural expectations experienced by students.

Much character education has traditionally been organized around formal programs, curricular interventions, religious activities, moral instruction, disciplinary policies, and extracurricular initiatives. Such programs remain important, but an exclusive focus on formal interventions may overlook the cultural environment in which students actually learn how to behave. Character is developed not only through what teachers explicitly teach but also through what students repeatedly observe, experience, and practice within the school community. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) argue that effective character education involves multiple dimensions of school life rather than isolated instructional activities. Similarly, Lickona et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of creating a comprehensive school culture in which core values are embedded in relationships, classroom practices, school governance, and daily routines. This perspective suggests that a gap may emerge between declared values and lived values when schools promote particular moral principles formally but fail to consistently embody them in institutional practices.

School culture consequently represents an important but sometimes underestimated mechanism of character formation. School culture encompasses shared norms, values, expectations, relationships, rituals, practices, and assumptions that shape how members of a school community understand appropriate behavior (Deal & Peterson, 2016). From a psychological perspective, repeated participation in such an environment can influence students' moral reasoning, self-regulation, social identity, and behavioral choices. The school therefore functions as a form of hidden curriculum through which students learn values implicitly through everyday experiences. What schools reward, prohibit, tolerate, celebrate, and model communicates powerful moral messages to students. Character formation thus occurs through an interaction between

formal educational intentions and the informal cultural processes embedded in everyday school life.

Teachers occupy a particularly important position within this cultural process because students encounter teachers not only as instructors but also as behavioral and moral models. Social learning theory explains that individuals can acquire patterns of behavior by observing significant others and interpreting the consequences associated with particular behaviors (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Within schools, teachers' consistency, fairness, respectfulness, responsibility, and interpersonal conduct may therefore communicate moral expectations more powerfully than verbal instruction alone. When teachers demonstrate the values they expect students to practice, moral norms become observable and socially meaningful. Conversely, inconsistency between teachers' statements and actions may weaken the credibility of character education. Teacher-student relationships are also important because students' experiences of respect, fairness, care, and trust can shape their willingness to internalize institutional values and participate responsibly in the school community (Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013).

This issue becomes particularly significant in Islamic secondary schools, where character formation is closely connected with religious values and everyday religious practices. Islamic education traditionally emphasizes the development of moral conduct (*akhlaq*), responsibility, discipline, compassion, respect, and social concern. Religious routines such as collective prayer, Qur'anic activities, greetings, communal worship, charitable practices, and other forms of habituation may provide repeated opportunities for students to translate religious principles into behavioral practices. However, the existence of religious routines alone does not necessarily guarantee moral internalization. Their educational significance depends on how these practices are embedded within broader institutional norms, teacher behavior, peer relationships, and students' everyday experiences. Islamic school culture can therefore be understood as an environment in which religious values and institutional practices interact to shape students' moral orientations and social behavior.

Previous research has established the importance of school climate and school culture in students' social-emotional and behavioral development, while character education research has demonstrated the importance of comprehensive approaches rather than isolated interventions

(Berkowitz et al., 2008; Lickona et al., 2007). Research on moral education has likewise highlighted the significance of moral exemplars, relationships, habituation, and opportunities for responsible action (Kristjánsson, 2015). Nevertheless, there remains a need for contextually grounded qualitative research that explains how these different elements interact within Islamic secondary schools. Existing discussions often examine character programs, religious habituation, teacher influence, or school culture separately. Less attention has been given to character as an emergent process resulting from the interaction of school culture, teacher modeling, institutional norms, religious routines, peer interaction, and students' lived experiences. This gap is particularly important because moral and social responsibility cannot be adequately understood solely through students' knowledge of values; it must also be examined through their everyday practices, relationships, decisions, and participation in the school community.

Building on this gap, the present study conceptualizes character formation as a school-cultural process rather than simply the outcome of formal character education programs. Its novelty lies in examining how institutional norms, teacher role modeling, religious habituation, peer interaction, and everyday student experiences collectively contribute to the internalization and enactment of moral and social values. The study therefore moves beyond the question of whether schools implement character education programs toward the more fundamental question of how the culture of an Islamic secondary school makes character visible, meaningful, and actionable in students' everyday lives. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the cultural mechanisms through which character is formed and how these mechanisms contribute to students' moral and social responsibility. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (1) How is character formation embedded in the everyday culture of Islamic secondary schools? (2) How do teachers and school communities model and reinforce students' moral values? and (3) How does school culture shape students' moral and social responsibility?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how school culture shapes students' moral and social responsibility in an Islamic secondary school. A qualitative approach

was selected because the study sought to understand character formation as a contextual and socially constructed process emerging through everyday interactions, institutional practices, religious routines, and students' experiences. Rather than measuring character formation through predetermined quantitative indicators, the study explored how moral values were interpreted, enacted, reinforced, and negotiated within the natural setting of the school. The case study design enabled an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon within its real-life institutional context, particularly because the boundaries between school culture and character formation are closely interconnected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in an Islamic secondary school that systematically integrates general education with Islamic values, religious routines, and character development practices. The school was purposively selected because it provided a relevant setting for examining the relationship between institutional culture and students' moral and social development. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with consideration given to their direct involvement in the formation and experience of school culture (Patton, 2015).

The participants consisted of the school principal, teachers, and students. The principal was included to provide information regarding institutional policies, school values, and character-development strategies. Teachers were selected because they directly implement school norms, provide moral guidance, and serve as behavioral role models. Students were included to explore how institutional values and teacher practices were experienced and interpreted from the learner perspective. Participant selection continued until the collected data provided sufficient depth and variation to explain the emerging themes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, and students to explore perceptions and experiences concerning school norms, teacher modeling, religious habituation, discipline, interpersonal relationships, and moral and social responsibility. Open-ended questions allowed participants to explain their experiences while enabling the researcher to pursue relevant issues that emerged during the interviews.

Observations were conducted to examine character formation as it occurred in everyday school practices. Particular attention was given to classroom interactions, teacher-student relationships, religious routines, disciplinary practices, student cooperation, peer interactions, and leadership activities. Observation was important because some aspects of school culture may operate implicitly and may not be fully articulated during interviews.

School documents were also analyzed, including school regulations, vision and mission statements, student guidelines, schedules of religious activities, character-development programs, and relevant disciplinary documents. Document analysis was used to compare officially stated institutional values with practices observed in the school.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following a systematic process of familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were initially coded according to recurring concepts related to school norms, religious routines, teacher modeling, discipline, peer interaction, responsibility, empathy, cooperation, and leadership. Related codes were then grouped into broader categories and themes corresponding to the three research questions.

The analysis followed an iterative process in which emerging interpretations were continuously compared across participants and data sources. This process enabled the researcher to identify patterns as well as differences between institutional expectations, teacher practices, and students' experiences.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the findings was established through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Methodological triangulation involved comparing interview findings with observations and school documents, while source triangulation compared perspectives from principals, teachers, and students. Member checking was conducted by confirming selected interpretations with participants to reduce misunderstanding of their statements. Peer debriefing was also used to critically examine the coding and interpretation process. These procedures

strengthened the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Character Formation through School Culture

The findings indicate that character formation in the Islamic secondary school is embedded in the everyday culture of the institution rather than being confined to a particular character education program. Students encounter moral expectations through school norms, religious routines, disciplinary practices, habituation, the physical environment, and patterns of interaction with teachers and peers. These cultural elements operate simultaneously and create a context in which students repeatedly experience expectations concerning appropriate behavior. Character formation consequently develops through participation in the daily life of the school, where values are continuously communicated, practiced, reinforced, and negotiated.

School norms represent an important mechanism through which moral expectations become visible in students' daily experiences. Expectations concerning punctuality, discipline, cleanliness, respectful communication, responsibility, and compliance with institutional regulations are communicated not only through written school rules but also through repeated interactions between teachers and students. When these expectations are consistently practiced across different areas of school life, they become part of the behavioral standards that students recognize as normal. The findings support the view that school climate is shaped by shared perceptions concerning norms, relationships, safety, and institutional practices, all of which can influence students' development and behavior (Wang & Degol, 2016). The significance of school norms therefore extends beyond maintaining order because they provide students with a framework for understanding responsibility within a collective environment.

Religious routines constitute a distinctive dimension of character formation in the Islamic secondary school. Daily prayer, religious greetings, Qur'anic activities, collective worship, and other religious practices create repeated opportunities for students to connect religious principles with behavioral conduct. The educational value of these routines lies in their continuity. Values such as discipline, respect, self-control, gratitude, and concern for others are encountered

repeatedly rather than being presented only as theoretical concepts. Religious routines thus function as mechanisms of habituation through which moral expectations become integrated into ordinary school activities.

The findings also demonstrate that religious routines acquire greater character-building significance when they are connected with interpersonal conduct. Participation in collective worship, for example, creates opportunities for students to practice punctuality, orderly behavior, respect for others, and collective responsibility. Religious activities consequently become part of a wider moral environment rather than isolated ritual practices. This observation is consistent with the argument that religious education can contribute to moral development when learners are given opportunities to connect religious knowledge with lived ethical practice (Hefner, 2011).

Disciplinary practices provide another mechanism through which school culture shapes character. Discipline in the school functions not only as a mechanism for preventing inappropriate behavior but also as a means of teaching accountability. Students are expected to recognize that their actions have consequences for themselves and for other members of the school community. This creates an important transition from external regulation toward self-regulation. When disciplinary responses are accompanied by explanation and moral reflection, students are encouraged to understand why particular behaviors are considered inappropriate rather than merely learning how to avoid sanctions.

Habituation strengthens this process because character-related behaviors become embedded through repetition. Respectful greetings, punctual attendance, maintaining cleanliness, participating in religious routines, completing responsibilities, and cooperating with peers are practiced repeatedly within the institutional environment. Repetition provides students with opportunities to transform abstract values into behavioral patterns. Character therefore becomes visible not only during formal character education activities but also through ordinary actions that occur throughout the school day.

The physical and social environment contributes to this process through what can be understood as a hidden curriculum. School spaces, displays of religious values, cleanliness standards, classroom arrangements, and the visibility of institutional expectations communicate messages about what the school considers important. Students learn from the institutional

environment even when no explicit lesson is being delivered. The hidden curriculum is particularly influential when institutional messages are consistent with the formal curriculum and teacher behavior. School culture consequently communicates values through both explicit instruction and implicit social signals.

Student interaction adds a horizontal dimension to character formation. Students observe, imitate, encourage, challenge, and correct one another within everyday interactions. Cooperation in classroom activities, assistance among peers, conflict resolution, and collective participation create opportunities for students to experience moral values socially. The process demonstrates that character formation is not exclusively determined by teacher instruction. Students are also active participants in reproducing the moral culture of the institution.

The findings can therefore be interpreted as evidence that school culture functions as a continuous character-learning environment. Institutional norms establish expectations, religious routines provide repeated practice, disciplinary practices establish accountability, and peer interaction provides a social context for applying values. Character emerges from the cumulative experience of participating in these practices. This perspective moves the discussion of character education beyond the existence of formal programs toward the cultural conditions that make those programs meaningful in everyday student behavior.

Teacher Modeling and Moral Reinforcement

Teachers occupy a central position in the formation of students' moral values because they represent the institutional culture through their everyday conduct. The findings show that teacher behavior communicates moral expectations through actions as well as verbal instruction. Punctuality, fairness, honesty, respectful communication, responsibility, emotional control, and consistency in dealing with students provide concrete examples of the values that the school expects students to develop.

Teacher modeling can be understood through social learning processes in which students acquire behavioral patterns by observing significant others. Bandura's social cognitive perspective emphasizes that behavior is influenced by observational learning, environmental conditions, and reciprocal interaction between individuals and their social contexts (Bandura, 2001). Within the school environment, teachers become highly visible behavioral models because students encounter

them repeatedly across different situations. A teacher who demonstrates fairness when dealing with student mistakes communicates a different moral message from a teacher who applies rules inconsistently. The credibility of character education is consequently connected to the consistency between what teachers say and what they practice.

Teacher-student interaction also contributes to moral reinforcement. Respectful communication, constructive correction, listening, and recognition of students' perspectives provide students with direct experiences of the values promoted by the school. Such relationships create an environment in which discipline can be experienced as guidance rather than simply control. The relational dimension is important because students are more likely to interpret institutional expectations positively when those expectations are communicated through respectful relationships.

Moral guidance occurs through both formal and informal interactions. Teachers can use classroom situations, student conflicts, violations of school rules, or everyday social problems as opportunities to discuss responsibility and consequences. These moments allow students to move from simply knowing a rule toward understanding the moral reasoning behind it. Character formation thus becomes connected to practical decision-making.

Reward and punishment are also used to reinforce behavioral expectations. Rewards can strengthen positive conduct by recognizing responsibility, cooperation, discipline, and achievement. Corrective measures communicate institutional boundaries when students violate established expectations. The educational value of these mechanisms depends on whether students gradually develop internal reasons for acting responsibly. Excessive dependence on external rewards may encourage instrumental compliance, whereas punishment without reflection may produce avoidance rather than moral understanding. Reinforcement becomes more meaningful when it helps students recognize the consequences of their actions and understand their responsibilities toward others.

Peer influence operates alongside teacher influence. Students observe classmates and respond to peer expectations concerning discipline, religious participation, cooperation, and social behavior. Positive peer behavior can reinforce institutional values, while negative peer pressure

can weaken them. The findings therefore indicate that moral reinforcement is distributed across the school community rather than being exclusively controlled by teachers.

Religious habituation strengthens teacher modeling when educators actively participate in the same practices expected from students. When teachers join religious routines, demonstrate respectful conduct, and apply institutional values consistently, religious principles become visible as shared commitments. This alignment between religious teaching, teacher behavior, and institutional practice contributes to the development of a coherent moral environment.

Teacher modeling consequently serves as a connecting mechanism between institutional culture and student behavior. School values become more credible when students can see those values enacted by adults in authentic situations. The moral influence of teachers is therefore not limited to classroom instruction; it extends to the broader social environment in which students interpret what responsibility, respect, fairness, and religious commitment mean in practice.

School Culture and Social Responsibility

The findings indicate that school culture contributes to the development of students' social responsibility by providing repeated opportunities to practice responsibility, empathy, cooperation, community participation, moral decision-making, and leadership. These outcomes demonstrate that character formation extends beyond individual obedience and self-discipline toward students' relationships with other people and their participation in collective life.

Responsibility becomes visible when students are expected to complete tasks, follow collective agreements, maintain shared spaces, participate in school activities, and accept the consequences of their decisions. Such experiences help students recognize that responsibility involves fulfilling obligations even when direct supervision is limited. The development of responsibility is therefore closely connected to opportunities for students to exercise autonomy within clearly established institutional expectations.

Empathy develops through social interaction and experiences that require students to recognize the needs of others. Peer assistance, collaborative activities, religious-social programs, and responses to students experiencing difficulties provide opportunities for students to move beyond self-interest. A school culture that values care and mutual assistance creates social conditions in which empathy can be practiced as an everyday behavior.

Cooperation is similarly developed through collective activities. Group learning, religious programs, extracurricular activities, student organizations, and school events require students to coordinate their actions with others. These experiences provide practical lessons concerning communication, task distribution, negotiation, and mutual dependence. Social responsibility therefore becomes an experiential outcome rather than merely a moral concept communicated through instruction.

Community participation extends this process beyond interpersonal relationships within the classroom. Activities involving social service, charity, environmental care, religious communities, or other forms of collective engagement allow students to understand their responsibilities toward broader communities. Such experiences can strengthen civic orientations because students encounter situations in which their actions have consequences beyond their immediate personal interests. Research on service-learning similarly demonstrates that meaningful engagement in community-oriented activities can contribute to social and citizenship outcomes (Yorio & Ye, 2012).

Citizenship-oriented behavior emerges through students' participation in shared institutional life. Respecting common rules, protecting shared resources, cooperating with diverse peers, and contributing to collective activities represent forms of everyday citizenship. Within an Islamic secondary school, these behaviors can be connected with religious values concerning responsibility, mutual assistance, justice, and social care. Religious character thus has the potential to support a broader conception of citizenship when values are translated into concrete social practices.

Moral decision-making becomes increasingly important as students encounter situations in which rules, peer expectations, personal interests, and social responsibilities may intersect. School culture provides students with reference points for evaluating such situations. Students can learn to consider not only whether an action is permitted but also whether it is fair, responsible, respectful, and beneficial to others. This represents a movement from simple rule compliance toward moral judgment.

Student leadership provides an important expression of this development. Leadership opportunities allow students to organize activities, coordinate peers, resolve problems, make

decisions, and assume responsibility for collective outcomes. Through these experiences, students become active participants in the production of school culture. They do not simply receive institutional values; they contribute to maintaining and transmitting those values to their peers.

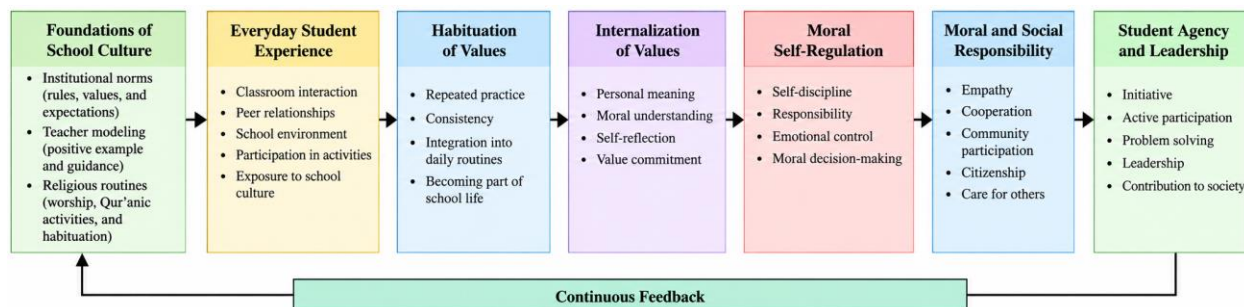


Figure 1. School Culture-Based Character Formation Model in Islamic Secondary Schools

The model illustrates that character formation is a dynamic cultural process. Institutional norms establish the behavioral framework, teacher modeling provides visible moral examples, and religious routines create repeated opportunities for value practice. These elements converge in students' everyday experiences, where habituation and social interaction facilitate value internalization. Internalized values are subsequently expressed through self-regulation and forms of moral and social responsibility. Opportunities for agency and leadership represent a further stage in which students actively reproduce the values of the school community.

The model also indicates that character formation should not be understood as a linear transfer of values from teachers to students. Students interpret institutional expectations through their own experiences and interactions with peers. The same school rule can therefore acquire different meanings depending on how teachers implement it, how peers respond to it, and how consistently the wider school environment supports it. School culture becomes effective when its normative, relational, religious, and behavioral dimensions reinforce one another.

The central implication is that Islamic schools do not need to rely exclusively on additional character education programs to strengthen students' moral development. Greater attention should be given to the cultural consistency of everyday school life. When institutional norms, teacher conduct, religious routines, disciplinary practices, peer relationships, and leadership opportunities communicate compatible values, students encounter character education as a lived experience. This strengthens the possibility that moral values will move from formal knowledge toward behavioral dispositions and social responsibility.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that character formation in Islamic secondary schools is embedded in everyday school culture rather than limited to formal programs. Institutional norms, religious routines, disciplinary practices, habituation, the school environment, and student interaction create a moral context in which students repeatedly encounter expectations concerning responsibility, respect, discipline, cooperation, and care for others. Character becomes meaningful when values are consistently practiced across ordinary activities. School culture therefore functions as a continuous character-learning environment connecting formal educational intentions with students' lived experiences.

Teacher modeling constitutes a critical mechanism within this cultural process. Teachers communicate moral values through their conduct, relationships, guidance, and responses to student behavior. Consistency between teachers' statements and actions strengthens institutional values, while respectful correction and meaningful reinforcement help students understand behavioral expectations. Religious habituation becomes significant when teachers participate in and embody practices expected from students. Peer influence also contributes by reinforcing or challenging behavioral norms within the school community.

School culture shapes moral and social responsibility by providing opportunities to practice responsibility, empathy, cooperation, community participation, citizenship, moral decision-making, and leadership. These experiences indicate movement from external compliance toward self-regulation and student agency. The proposed School Culture-Based Character Formation Model conceptualizes development as a dynamic process in which institutional norms, teacher modeling, and religious routines shape everyday experiences, facilitate value internalization, and support moral and social responsibility. The model contributes to character education scholarship by positioning culture as a central mechanism of formation.

Islamic schools should strengthen coherence between formal character programs and everyday institutional practices. Character development requires consistent norms, exemplary teacher behavior, meaningful religious routines, supportive peer relationships, reflective discipline, and opportunities for responsibility and leadership. The study is limited by its

qualitative case-study context, restricting generalization. Future research could employ comparative or longitudinal designs to examine how school-cultural mechanisms influence character development across Islamic educational contexts and over time.

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