

## **Moral Formation and Its Limits: A Case Study of Islamic Educational Ethics in a Madrasah Tsanawiyah, East Java**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Islamic educational ethics play a central role in shaping students' moral, spiritual, and intellectual development. This study examines how Islamic ethical values are understood, practiced, and internalized within an Islamic school context in East Java, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research involved 18 participants consisting of five Islamic education teachers, twelve eighth-grade students, and one school principal at a Madrasah Tsanawiyah. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to ethical understanding, classroom implementation, and moral internalization. The findings reveal that teachers conceptualized Islamic educational ethics through values such as *adab* (proper conduct), *ikhlas* (sincerity), *amanah* (responsibility), and respect for knowledge, whereas students primarily interpreted ethics as compliance with school rules and behavioral expectations. The study also found that ethical values were consistently enacted through classroom routines, including prayers, Qur'anic recitation, respectful greetings, collaborative learning, and teacher modeling. However, students' moral internalization remained limited, as ethical behaviors were often motivated by external regulation rather than personal moral conviction, and opportunities for reflective discussion of ethical dilemmas were rarely provided. The study highlights a gap between the institutional emphasis on Islamic ethical education and students' deeper moral development, suggesting the need for more reflective and student-centered pedagogical approaches in Islamic schools.

**Keywords:** Adab, Character Education, Educational Ethics, Islamic Education, Moral Internalization

### **INTRODUCTION**

Education in Islam is not merely a process of knowledge transmission but a holistic system aimed at the formation of human character grounded in moral and spiritual values. Within the Islamic worldview, education (*tarbiyah*) is understood as a comprehensive process that nurtures human beings intellectually, spiritually, morally, and socially. Al-Attas (1979) argues that the fundamental aim of Islamic education is the cultivation of *adab*, which refers to the recognition and actualization of appropriate conduct, discipline, and one's proper relationship with God, society, and knowledge. Therefore, the ultimate goal of Islamic education is not only academic achievement but also the development of individuals who embody ethical conduct (*akhlaq*) in accordance with Islamic teachings (Momen, 2024). Within this framework,

learning is not value-neutral; rather, it is embedded in a moral vision that connects human development with divine guidance. Consequently, educational ethics in Islam are inseparable from the broader purpose of human existence, namely devotion to God (*'ibadah*) and responsible contribution to society.

In this sense, educational ethics in Islam are closely intertwined with the concept of *tarbiyah*, which emphasizes the gradual nurturing of the learner's mind, soul, and behavior simultaneously. Unlike modern secular educational paradigms that often prioritize cognitive development and measurable academic outcomes, Islamic educational philosophy places equal, if not greater, emphasis on moral formation and spiritual refinement (Alkouatli, 2024). Learning is therefore viewed as a process of internal transformation rather than mere intellectual accumulation. The teacher, in this context, is not only a transmitter of knowledge but also a moral guide and role model whose behavior significantly influences students' character development.

Islamic scholars have long emphasized the centrality of ethics in education. Al-Attas (1979), for instance, argues that education in Islam is fundamentally about the instillation of *adab*, a concept that encompasses proper conduct, discipline, and recognition of one's appropriate place in relation to God, society, and knowledge. *Adab* is not limited to polite behavior but reflects a deeper philosophical understanding of justice, hierarchy of knowledge, and spiritual awareness. According to Al-Attas, the loss of *adab* leads to confusion in knowledge and the deterioration of moral order in society. Therefore, education without *adab* is considered incomplete, as it fails to achieve its ultimate purpose of producing balanced and ethical human beings.

Similarly, Al-Ghazali, one of the most influential classical Islamic thinkers, emphasized that knowledge without moral refinement leads to corruption rather than enlightenment (Dudić & Smailagić, 2024). In his *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, he repeatedly stresses that knowledge (*'ilm*) must be accompanied by sincerity (*ikhlas*) and righteous action (*amal salih*). For Al-Ghazali (2005), knowledge is not valuable in itself unless it transforms the heart and behavior of the learner. These classical perspectives collectively highlight that ethics are not an additional or peripheral component of Islamic education but rather its very foundation. Without ethical grounding, education risks becoming a process of intellectual development detached from moral responsibility, potentially resulting in arrogance, misuse of knowledge, or social harm.

In contemporary Islamic educational institutions, especially in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Islamic values are formally integrated into curricula through religious subjects, character education programs, and school culture initiatives (Nasution, 2024). Madrasahs and Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) explicitly emphasize moral development alongside academic instruction. Daily routines such as collective prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and moral instruction are designed to reinforce Islamic ethical values. Previous studies have demonstrated that these institutional practices contribute to the transmission and reinforcement of Islamic values among students (Gani et al., 2024; Hidayatulloh et al., 2024; Ma'arif et al., 2024). However, the extent to which these formally promoted values are understood, experienced, and internalized by students remains an unresolved issue in Islamic education research. Existing studies have largely focused on curriculum implementation, value integration, and institutional character-building programs, while less attention has been given to students' lived experiences of ethical learning and the processes through which moral values move from external practices to internal convictions.

Many schools tend to emphasize cognitive achievement, standardized testing, and academic performance, while moral and ethical development is often assumed to occur

automatically as a by-product of religious instruction. In practice, ethical education may be reduced to ritual compliance or behavioral regulation rather than deep internal transformation. Students may demonstrate appropriate behavior within school settings but not necessarily internalize the underlying moral principles in their personal lives. This gap between formal instruction and lived ethical experience raises important questions about the effectiveness of current pedagogical approaches in Islamic education. Previous research has similarly indicated that moral education requires more than the transmission of values; it requires meaningful engagement, reflection, and opportunities for learners to connect ethical principles with real-life situations (Liu, 2024; Judijanto & Arwen, 2025).

Furthermore, there is increasing recognition that moral education cannot be achieved solely through instruction or repetition of values. Instead, it requires active engagement, reflection, and consistent modeling by educators (Liu, 2024). The role of teachers becomes particularly significant, as students often learn ethical behavior through observation and social interaction. When inconsistencies arise between what is taught and what is practiced, students may experience confusion or develop a superficial understanding of ethics. Therefore, examining classroom interactions and participants' perspectives is essential to understanding how Islamic ethical principles are transformed from institutional ideals into everyday educational experiences.

Although previous studies have provided valuable insights into the role of Islamic values in curriculum development and school-based character education, they have not sufficiently explored how teachers and students experience the implementation and internalization of these values within actual classroom contexts. This study addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences of teachers and students in an Indonesian Islamic school through classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. By examining both formal pedagogical practices and everyday interactions, this study contributes a contextual understanding of how Islamic educational ethics are enacted, negotiated, and internalized in real educational settings.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how Islamic educational ethics are practiced in real educational settings. It focuses on the lived experiences of teachers and students in understanding, teaching, and internalizing ethical values within the classroom context. By examining both pedagogical practices and daily interactions, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how Islamic ethical principles are translated into educational practice. The central research question guiding this study is: How are Islamic educational ethics implemented and experienced in classroom practices within Islamic schools?

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore Islamic educational ethics in a real educational setting. A qualitative design was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations related to moral and ethical education in Islam. Rather than focusing on numerical measurement, this approach emphasizes meaning-making processes and contextual understanding. The case study method was particularly suitable because it enables the researcher to investigate educational practices within a specific institutional context, providing a holistic view of how Islamic educational ethics are enacted in daily school life.

The research was conducted in an Islamic secondary school at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level located in East Java, Indonesia. This setting was chosen because madrasahs play a significant role in integrating religious values with formal education in the Indonesian education system. The participants in this study consisted of five Islamic education teachers, twelve eighth-grade students, and one school principal. The five teachers were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in Islamic education and character-building activities, with a minimum teaching experience of five years to ensure sufficient knowledge of the school's ethical education practices. The twelve eighth-grade students were selected purposively from the available grade-eight cohort based on teachers' recommendations, representing students with varying levels of classroom participation and engagement in school-based ethical activities. The selection of these participants was intended to capture diverse perspectives regarding the implementation and internalization of Islamic educational ethics. These participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experience and insight into the implementation of Islamic educational ethics in the school environment. The selection criteria focused on individuals who were directly involved in teaching, learning, and managing educational activities related to moral and character development.

Data were collected using three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, students, and the principal to gain deeper insights into their understanding and interpretation of Islamic educational ethics. The interviews allowed participants to express their experiences freely while still being guided by key research questions. Classroom observations were carried out to examine real-time interactions between teachers and students, instructional strategies, and behavioral norms during learning activities. A total of eight classroom sessions were observed over a period of four weeks. Field notes were recorded using a structured observation protocol focusing on teacher modeling of ethical values, student participation, teacher-student interactions, classroom routines, and the enactment of Islamic ethical practices during learning activities. These observations provided valuable contextual data on how ethical values were practiced and reinforced in everyday classroom settings. In addition, document analysis was conducted on relevant school materials such as curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, and character education programs. These documents helped to identify how ethical values were formally structured and integrated into the educational system.

The data collected from these multiple sources were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which includes familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Initially, all interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were organized and simplified to focus on relevant information. The data were then coded to identify significant statements related to Islamic educational ethics. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories, which were further refined into major themes. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns related to ethical values, pedagogical practices, and the internalization of moral principles among students.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, triangulation was used by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents to ensure consistency and depth of understanding. This helped to reduce bias and increase the reliability of the findings. Second, member checking was conducted by sharing interpretations with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's understanding.

Participants were given the opportunity to clarify or elaborate on their responses, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their perspectives. Through these strategies, the study sought to enhance credibility, dependability, and overall rigor in the qualitative research process.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, the study received approval from the institutional research ethics committee of Universitas Pesantren Tinggi Darul Ulum (Approval No. 087/LPPM/Unipdu/I/2025). Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, including teachers and the school principal. Because the study involved Grade 8 students as minors, informed consent was obtained from their parents or legal guardians, and student assent was obtained before participation. Participants were informed about the research objectives, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. To maintain confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports, and pseudonyms were used when presenting participant perspectives.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **FINDINGS**

The findings of this study are organized into three major themes: (1) conceptual understanding of Islamic educational ethics, (2) implementation of ethical values in teaching practices, and (3) challenges in moral internalization. These themes were generated through thematic analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and relevant school documents. The findings present not only researcher interpretations but also participants' voices to illustrate how Islamic educational ethics are understood and experienced within the selected Islamic school context.

#### **UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL ETHICS**

The first theme concerns how teachers, students, and the school principal conceptualize Islamic educational ethics. Interview data revealed differences between teachers' philosophical understanding of ethics and students' more practical interpretation of ethical behavior. Teachers generally viewed ethics as inseparable from knowledge acquisition and character development. They emphasized that Islamic education should transform students' attitudes and actions, rather than merely provide religious knowledge.

A teacher explained:

“Teaching without ethics is incomplete because knowledge must guide behavior.” (T1, interview)

Similarly, another teacher emphasized the inseparability between knowledge and moral responsibility:

“Students should not only understand lessons academically, but they should also learn how to respect knowledge, teachers, and other people.” (T2, interview)

The school principal also highlighted the institutional perspective of Islamic ethics:

“Our goal is not only to make students successful academically but also to develop students who have good manners and responsibility.” (P1, interview)

In contrast, students tended to interpret Islamic educational ethics through observable behaviors and school expectations. Several students associated ethical conduct with obedience, discipline, and respectful interaction.

One student stated:

“Being ethical means following school rules, greeting teachers, and behaving properly in class.” (S3, interview)

Another student explained:

“We know that we have to respect teachers because it is part of being a good student.” (S7, interview)

These findings indicate that while teachers primarily understood ethics as a value-based and philosophical concept involving *adab*, *ikhlas*, and *amanah*, students tended to perceive ethics as behavioral compliance. This difference suggests a gap between conceptual understanding among educators and students’ lived interpretation of Islamic educational values.

Table 1. Evidence-Based Understanding of Islamic Educational Ethics

Theme	Evidence from Participants	Data Source
<b>Ethics as moral foundation of education</b>	“Teaching without ethics is incomplete because knowledge must guide behavior.” (T1)	Interview
<b>Ethics as character formation</b>	“Students should not only understand lessons academically, but they should also learn how to respect knowledge, teachers, and other people.” (T2)	Interview
<b>Ethics as behavioral compliance</b>	“Being ethical means following school rules, greeting teachers, and behaving properly in class.” (S3)	Interview

#### IMPLEMENTATION OF ETHICAL VALUES IN LEARNING

The second theme examines how Islamic educational ethics were enacted in classroom practices. Observation data indicated that ethical values were embedded through daily routines, teacher modeling, and instructional activities. Classroom observations showed that lessons commonly began with prayers and Qur’anic recitation, followed by respectful greetings between teachers and students. These practices were also confirmed through interviews. A teacher explained:

“Beginning the lesson with prayer helps students prepare themselves spiritually and reminds them that learning is also an act of worship.” (T3, interview)

Another teacher described the importance of teacher modeling:

“Students learn not only from what we teach but also from how we behave in front of them.” (T4, interview)

Students also recognized the role of classroom routines in shaping ethical behavior:

“When teachers show patience and respect, we learn to do the same with our friends.” (S5, interview)

Classroom observations further showed that teachers reinforced ethical values through collaborative learning activities, respectful communication, and moral storytelling. In particular, teachers frequently used narratives from Islamic history and the lives of prophets and scholars (*ulama*) to connect ethical concepts with everyday experiences. However, observation data also revealed that most ethical activities remained teacher-directed. Students generally followed established routines but had limited opportunities to discuss ethical dilemmas or critically reflect on moral situations.

Table 2. Evidence-Based Implementation of Ethical Values in Classroom Practices

Practice	Supporting Evidence	Data Source
Opening lessons with prayer and Qur’anic recitation	“Beginning the lesson with prayer helps students prepare themselves spiritually...” (T3)	Interview
Teacher as moral model	“Students learn not only from what we teach but also from how we behave...” (T4)	Interview
Ethical learning through interaction	Students reported learning respect through teachers’ behavior (S5)	Interview
Routine-based ethical practices	Prayer, greetings, and moral storytelling were observed during classroom sessions	Observation

### CHALLENGES IN INTERNALIZING ETHICAL VALUES

The third theme identifies challenges affecting students’ internalization of Islamic educational ethics. Although ethical values were strongly promoted through school practices, interview and observation data indicated that internalization was not always achieved at a deeper level. The first challenge concerned inconsistency in teacher role modeling. Some students noted that differences between teachers’ instructions and behaviors could affect their perception of ethical messages. One student commented:

“Sometimes teachers tell us to be patient, but some teachers become angry quickly. It makes us confused.” (S9, interview)

Another student stated:

“We follow good examples from teachers because we see them every day.” (S10, interview)

The second challenge involved ritualistic understanding. Students often performed ethical routines because they were school requirements rather than because they fully understood their moral significance. A student explained:

“We greet teachers because it is a school habit, although sometimes we do not think deeply about its meaning.” (S12, interview)

The third challenge was limited reflective learning. Observation data indicated that classroom activities provided few opportunities for students to discuss ethical problems or explain the reasoning behind moral choices. The principal acknowledged this challenge:

“We have strong programs for character education, but helping students internalize values requires continuous guidance and reflection.” (P1, interview)

These findings suggest that ethical education in the studied context has successfully established behavioral routines but still faces challenges in transforming external compliance into internal moral awareness.

Table 3. Evidence-Based Challenges in Ethical Internalization

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Evidence from Participants</b>	<b>Data Source</b>
<b>Inconsistent role modeling</b>	“Sometimes teachers tell us to be patient, but some teachers become angry quickly.” (S9)	Interview
<b>Ritualistic understanding</b>	“We greet teachers because it is a school habit, although sometimes we do not think deeply about its meaning.” (S12)	Interview
<b>Need for reflection</b>	“Helping students internalize values requires continuous guidance and reflection.” (P1)	Interview
<b>Limited ethical dialogue</b>	Few opportunities for moral discussion were identified during classroom observation	Observation

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Islamic educational ethics are strongly embedded in the school’s formal practices, classroom routines, and teacher-student interactions. However, the findings also reveal a distinction between the visible practice of ethical behaviors and the deeper internalization of moral values. While students demonstrated awareness of expected ethical conduct, their understanding was often shaped by external rules and routines rather than sustained moral reflection.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study provide important insights into how Islamic educational ethics are understood, implemented, and internalized within an Islamic school context. The three major themes—conceptual understanding of ethics, classroom implementation, and challenges in moral internalization—reveal both strengths and limitations in current pedagogical practices. Rather than simply confirming previous assumptions about Islamic character education, the findings demonstrate a more complex relationship between ethical teaching, classroom practices, and students’ moral development. This section discusses how the findings extend existing discussions by examining tensions between institutional ethical intentions and students’ lived experiences of moral learning.

### CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL ETHICS

The findings indicate that both teachers and students generally understand Islamic educational ethics as the integration of moral values into learning activities. Teachers emphasize core Islamic ethical concepts such as *adab*, *ikhlas*, *amanah*, and respect for knowledge, while students tend to interpret ethics more as obedience to school rules. This finding suggests that the transmission of Islamic ethical concepts does not automatically result in similar forms of moral understanding among learners. The difference between teachers' philosophical interpretation and students' practical interpretation indicates a process of meaning negotiation, in which institutional values may be transformed into simplified behavioral expectations.

This interpretation is consistent with Al-Attas (1979), who argues that Islamic education is fundamentally concerned with the cultivation of *adab*, involving the recognition of appropriate relationships between individuals, knowledge, society, and God. However, while Al-Attas emphasizes the ideal philosophical foundation of Islamic education, the present study reveals a practical challenge: students may encounter *adab* primarily through visible school routines rather than through deeper reflection on its spiritual and ethical meaning.

Studies by Hidayatulloh et al. (2024) and Gani et al. (2024) similarly highlight that Islamic education in Indonesia is strongly rooted in moral and spiritual values. Nevertheless, other studies have shown that institutional emphasis on religious values does not always lead to internalized ethical reasoning among students. For example, Lickona (1991) argues that character education may remain superficial when learners recognize moral concepts without integrating them into their personal identity. The present study extends this discussion by showing that the gap is not simply between knowing and doing, but between institutional definitions of ethics and students' everyday interpretations of what ethical behavior means.

The difference between teacher and student perspectives can be partially understood through Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development, which describes movement from externally regulated morality toward principled moral reasoning. In this study, students' emphasis on rules and external expectations resembles Kohlberg's conventional orientation, while teachers' understanding reflects a more principle-based interpretation of ethics. However, applying Kohlberg's framework requires caution because the model has been criticized for reflecting Western individualistic assumptions and for giving limited attention to spiritual obligations, communal relationships, and religious motivations that are central to Islamic morality. Islamic moral development cannot be fully explained only through individual cognitive progression. Scholars of Islamic ethics have emphasized that moral maturity also involves spiritual consciousness, responsibility before God, and integration of social obligations. Therefore, this study contributes by demonstrating that students' ethical development in Islamic schools should be understood through both cognitive reasoning and Islamic concepts of moral formation.

### IMPLEMENTATION OF ETHICAL VALUES IN CLASSROOM PRACTICES

The second theme reveals that Islamic educational ethics are actively embedded in classroom practices through rituals, teacher modeling, group work, and storytelling. The finding demonstrates that ethical education in the studied school operates primarily through habituation and exemplification rather than through explicit moral inquiry. While these practices

successfully create an ethical classroom environment, they also raise questions about whether repeated practices are sufficient to generate deeper moral understanding.

These findings are consistent with the pedagogical principles of Islamic education, where teachers serve as moral exemplars (*uswah hasanah*) and learning is integrated with spiritual routines such as prayer and Qur'anic recitation. Ma'arif et al. (2024) similarly found that Indonesian Islamic schools frequently use habituation and school culture as mechanisms for developing students' moral character.

However, other research suggests that habituation-based approaches may have limitations when students are not encouraged to critically engage with the meaning behind ethical practices. Jusubaidi et al. (2024), for example, found that many Islamic classrooms in Indonesia remain dominated by directive teaching, which positions students as recipients of moral instruction rather than active participants in ethical reasoning. This tension is also visible in the present study: although rituals and teacher modeling effectively reinforce expected behavior, limited opportunities for ethical dialogue restrict students' ability to connect values with complex situations in daily life.

The use of storytelling based on Islamic history aligns with Bruner's (1990) narrative learning theory, which suggests that stories enable learners to connect abstract concepts with human experiences. Hasanah et al. (2022) similarly highlights the importance of moral narratives in increasing emotional engagement with Islamic values. Nevertheless, the contribution of this study lies in showing that narrative and ritual practices require complementary reflective activities. Without opportunities for discussion and interpretation, stories may function primarily as moral messages delivered by teachers rather than as resources for students' own ethical reasoning.

From a constructivist perspective, this limitation is significant. Dewey (1938) argues that meaningful moral learning requires active experience and reflection. Similarly, Biesta (2009) warns that education can become reduced to measurable behavioral outcomes rather than transformative experiences. The present study extends these arguments by demonstrating that Islamic ethical practices may achieve behavioral effectiveness while simultaneously facing challenges in producing reflective moral agency among students.

### CHALLENGES IN INTERNALIZING ETHICAL VALUES

The third theme highlights several challenges in the internalization of Islamic educational ethics, including inconsistent role modeling, ritualistic understanding of ethics, limited reflective learning, and external motivation. These findings indicate that the central challenge is not the absence of ethical education but the difficulty of transforming externally organized practices into personally meaningful moral commitments.

The issue of inconsistent role modeling has been widely discussed in Islamic education studies. Sanderse (2024) emphasizes that teachers are central to moral formation because students learn ethics through observation and imitation. Similar findings were reported by Maulana (2022), who noted that inconsistency between teacher behavior and moral instruction reduces the effectiveness of character education programs.

However, this study contributes a more contextual interpretation by showing that teacher modeling operates within a relational Islamic framework in which teachers are not merely instructors but moral references whose personal conduct influences students' perception of ethical authenticity. Therefore, inconsistency affects not only instructional credibility but also students' trust in the moral meaning of educational practices.

The challenge of ritualistic understanding also resonates with Guefara et al. (2023), who argue that Islamic education in many contexts may emphasize ritual compliance over substantive moral understanding. At the same time, the present study complicates this argument by suggesting that rituals themselves are not problematic; rather, the issue emerges when rituals are disconnected from reflection and personal meaning-making. Practices such as greetings, prayer, and respectful behavior can serve as foundations for moral development when accompanied by dialogue and reflection.

The third challenge, limited reflective learning, is consistent with Judijanto and Arwen's (2025) critique of Islamic pedagogy, which often lacks opportunities for critical thinking and moral dialogue. Without structured reflection, students have limited opportunities to connect ethical principles with real-life dilemmas.

Nevertheless, interpreting this limitation solely through Western theories of critical thinking may overlook the spiritual and communal dimensions of Islamic morality. While Kohlberg's (1984) framework helps explain students' movement from external regulation toward internal reasoning, it does not fully capture Islamic concepts such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), accountability before God, and moral responsibility toward others. Therefore, this study suggests that Islamic moral development requires an integrated framework combining reflective reasoning with spiritual and communal dimensions of ethics.

The fourth challenge, external motivation, is closely related to Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory, which distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The findings suggest that many students engage in ethical behavior due to external regulation such as rules and supervision rather than internalized values.

Previous studies by Lickona (1991) emphasize that effective character education must move beyond compliance toward internalization, where values become part of students' identity. The present study extends this argument by demonstrating that in Islamic educational settings, internalization involves not only psychological ownership of values but also the integration of ethical conduct with religious meaning and social responsibility.

### INTEGRATIVE INTERPRETATION

When viewed collectively, the findings suggest a partial alignment between Islamic educational ideals and classroom realities. On one hand, the school demonstrates strong institutional commitment to ethical education through rituals, curriculum integration, and teacher modeling. On the other hand, the internalization of ethical values among students remains limited due to pedagogical constraints.

This duality reflects what Jackson (2011) describes as the "hidden curriculum" in moral education, where students learn not only from formal instruction but also from implicit practices and institutional culture. While the formal curriculum emphasizes ethics, the hidden curriculum may reinforce rule-following rather than reflective moral autonomy.

The findings also suggest that Islamic educational ethics operate at three interconnected levels: conceptual, behavioral, and internal. At the conceptual level, ethics are well understood by teachers but partially understood by students. At the behavioral level, ethical practices are clearly visible in classroom routines. However, at the internal level, ethical values are not yet fully integrated into students' personal moral frameworks.

This multi-layered structure indicates that Islamic educational ethics are present but not fully transformative. To bridge this gap, previous studies recommend the integration of

reflective pedagogy, dialogical learning, and experiential moral education (Dewey, 1938; Lickona, 1991; Biesta, 2009).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ISLAMIC EDUCATION

The findings of this study have important implications for Islamic educational practice. First, there is a need to strengthen teacher consistency as moral role models. Second, schools should move beyond ritualistic approaches by incorporating reflective discussions and ethical problem-solving activities. Third, student-centered learning strategies should be expanded to encourage active engagement with moral concepts. Finally, moral education should focus not only on behavior but also on internal value formation and identity development.

These implications align with contemporary Islamic education reform efforts, which emphasize the integration of spiritual values with critical thinking and learner autonomy. This study confirms that Islamic educational ethics are deeply embedded in school culture and teaching practices, but their internalization among students remains partial. While there is strong alignment with Islamic philosophical foundations and previous research, the findings highlight a persistent gap between ethical instruction and moral internalization. Addressing this gap requires pedagogical innovation, stronger teacher modeling, and increased opportunities for reflective moral learning.

### CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Islamic educational ethics are strongly embedded in both the conceptual understanding and daily practices within the Islamic school context. Teachers consistently emphasize core ethical values such as *adab*, *ikhlas*, and *amanah*, and these values are reflected in various classroom routines, including prayer openings, respectful greetings, cooperative learning activities, and moral storytelling. These practices demonstrate a clear institutional commitment to integrating ethical values into education.

However, despite this strong emphasis, the internalization of Islamic educational ethics among students remains partial. Students tend to understand ethics primarily as rule-following and behavioral compliance rather than as deeply internalized moral principles. This indicates a gap between external ethical practices and internal moral development. The findings suggest that the existence of structured ethical routines alone is insufficient to ensure deeper moral transformation, as students may perform ethical behaviors because of school expectations rather than personal conviction.

Several challenges contribute to this condition, including inconsistent role modeling by some teachers, ritualistic interpretations of ethical practices, limited opportunities for reflective learning, and the dominance of external motivation in shaping student behavior. As a result, ethical education often remains at the behavioral level without fully reaching the level of moral consciousness and identity formation. Specifically, the finding that most students associated ethical behavior with following rules, avoiding punishment, and fulfilling school routines indicates that ethical learning requires pedagogical strategies that help students interpret the meaning behind practices rather than merely repeat them. Because students demonstrated limited opportunities to discuss ethical dilemmas during classroom activities, structured ethical dialogue—such as guided moral discussions, reflective journals, or dilemma-based learning activities—may provide opportunities for students to connect Islamic values with personal experiences and gradually develop internal moral commitment.

Therefore, this study suggests the need for contextually grounded reflective, student-centered, and dialogical pedagogical approaches to strengthen the internalization of Islamic educational ethics in school settings. This recommendation is directly derived from the finding that ethical practices in the observed classrooms were largely teacher-directed, with students primarily positioned as recipients of moral instruction. Moving from transmission-based approaches toward reflective engagement may enable students to become active participants in constructing ethical understanding.

This study has several limitations. First, the single-site design involving one Islamic secondary school limits the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the relatively small number of participants may not represent the broader diversity of experiences among students and teachers in different Islamic educational institutions. Third, as with qualitative research, the interpretation of participants' experiences may have been influenced by the researcher's positionality, particularly in analyzing culturally and religiously situated meanings of Islamic educational ethics. Future research could examine multiple madrasahs across different provinces in Indonesia to explore contextual variations in ethical education practices. In addition, future studies could employ mixed-methods designs to triangulate qualitative findings with quantitative measures of student moral internalization, ethical reasoning development, and the relationship between pedagogical approaches and students' moral outcomes.

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