

Akidah Akhlak Teachers and the Formation of Students' Religious Character: A Qualitative Case Study at a Laboratory Madrasah Tsanawiah in Jambi

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Akidah Akhlak teachers in shaping students' religious character and explores how the madrasah environment supports this process. Using a qualitative single-case study design, the research was conducted at MTs Laboratorium Jambi. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving 19 purposively selected participants, including Akidah Akhlak teachers, students, the principal, the curriculum coordinator, and guidance counselors. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña with the assistance of NVivo 12, while trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails. The findings reveal that *Akidah Akhlak* teachers perform multidimensional roles as moral role models, pedagogical innovators, spiritual counselors, motivators, and collaborators. These roles are strengthened by a supportive madrasah ecosystem consisting of structured religious programs, cross-curricular value integration, teacher collaboration, and integrated student mentoring. The synergy between teacher consistency and institutional support contributes to students' religious discipline, honesty, responsibility, worship habits, and social awareness. However, the study is limited to a single madrasah context and does not measure long-term character development. This study concludes that religious character formation requires a holistic collaboration between teacher agency and madrasah culture, and future research should examine its sustainability across diverse madrasah settings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the current era of globalization and digital disruption, developing religious character among madrasah students is crucial to counteract moral degradation caused by the influence of social media and non-religious environments. Madrasah Tsanawiah Laboratorium, Jambi City, a leading Islamic educational institution in Jambi, faces similar challenges, with some students lacking discipline in congregational worship, such as the Dhuhr and Asr prayers, and susceptible to developing bad habits through their social interactions. This is all due to weak etiquette or character in students, which has impacted many aspects, such as a lack of respect for teachers and a lack of motivation to study and

worship. As stated by (Muspawi, 2020), character is a set of attitudes, behaviors, motivations, and skills. Therefore, character development must begin early and cannot be delayed.

This is because character development is the process of instilling positive values in children, with the goal of developing character in accordance with social norms and moral principles. The formation of character and personality through education is absolutely necessary and cannot be delayed. Character education in elementary schools is the foundation for developing a high-quality generation. Character education is a system for instilling character values in school members, encompassing knowledge, awareness or willingness, and actions to implement these values. Some of these values include religious values, discipline, and responsibility (Mayasari et al., 2022). The instillation of these values, such as religious values, ultimately determines the development of students' personalities and morals, which are also influenced by their surroundings, whether formal, informal, or non-formal (Arlini & Hanif, 2025).

Furthermore, character education is an effort undertaken by schools to shape, direct, and guide student behavior in accordance with values based on certain norms (Ilyas, 2023). In line with Thomas Lickona's statement, "Character education is a deliberate (conscious) effort to realize virtue, namely objectively good human qualities, not only good for individuals but also good for society as a whole." (Lickona, 2012).

Religious character education is the foundation for creating a generation with noble morals and character. Religious character education is first implemented in the home and school environment, where parents and schools play a crucial role in shaping children's religious character. Religious character is an attitude and behavior that adheres to religious teachings, is tolerant of the practices of other religions, and lives harmoniously with adherents of other faiths. (Mawadda et al., 2023).

Therefore, character education at home, at school, and in the community can be implemented effectively. Characters that need to be instilled in students include compassion, responsibility, discipline, independence, honesty, respect, and courtesy, compassion, caring, and cooperation. The formation of religious character in students is not solely the responsibility of religious teachers or religious education teachers; all teachers have a role to play, although religious teachers and religious education teachers play an active role in this regard. Because, literally, teachers are individuals who possess profound scientific knowledge that they impart to their students and have a central role in education, as teachers act as educators, mentors, motivators, and role models for their students. As stated by (Al Jailani et al., 2025), *Aqidah Akhlak* teachers act as mentors, role models, motivators, evaluators, and facilitators through their exemplary behavior.

Furthermore, (Ivanda & Neni, 2025) identified eight teacher roles, such as educator, mentor, and motivator, with supporting factors in the form of exemplary behavior and technology. (Saifannur, 2025) emphasized teachers as role models for a generation with good morals. (also concluded that the role of teachers includes being teachers, role models, and innovators. Another study (Siti Robe'ah & To, 2021) highlighted the role of teachers as educators, mentors, and role models for religious character.

This research is based on Thomas Lickona's (1991) theory of character education, which divides the character-building process into three stages: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. (Ulum & Slamet, 2025). This theory is complemented by (Bandura, 1969) social learning theory, which emphasizes modeling, where students imitate the teacher's exemplary behavior through observation, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Furthermore, the Islamic pedagogical framework refers to the principles of *da'wah bil hal* (real role model) and *da'wah bil lisan* (verbal teaching), as outlined in Surah An-Nahl: 125 and Surah Al-Asy-Shura: 13. (Deal & Peterson, 2016) school culture theory complements this by highlighting the role of the institutional environment in shaping collective norms and teacher collaboration to support character building.

However, research at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Laboratorium Jambi remains limited to general descriptions and lacks empirical measurements of the effectiveness of teachers' *Akidah Akhlak* strategies in the multicultural context of Jambi. (Hafiz & Suherdi, 2025) reinforces that students' religious character depends on the teacher's consistency as a daily evaluator. Furthermore, research (Paputungan, 2020) found that the role of *Akidah Akhlak* teachers is 80% effective in shaping religious character or noble morals.

Despite the richness of the related literature, key gaps remain: (1) a lack of in-depth qualitative case studies in Indonesian madrasas that explore the role of Akidah Akhlak teachers contextually; (2) limited exploration of collaborative teacher models, particularly integration with Guidance and Counseling and Rohis; (3) inadequate integration of Islamic pedagogy with Western character theories (such as Lickona and Bandura) (Ilyas, 2023; Wahyudi et al., 2024; Arlini & Hanif, 2025). This analysis is needed to fill this gap and support Islamic-based character education policies.

One strategic approach madrasas can take is to optimize the role of Akidah Akhlak teachers in shaping students' religious character. Religious character formation through Aqidah Akhlak teachers is a sustainable program integrated into the overall Islamic Religious Education teaching system in madrasas.

This aligns with (Wahyudi et al., 2024) statement that the success of madrasas in implementing religious character formation is highly dependent on the role of Aqidah Akhlak teachers as the primary actors in the field. The success or failure of student character formation is largely determined by Aqidah Akhlak teachers, as these teachers serve as the primary controllers, role models, and determinants of the direction of students' faith and morals toward the noble goals of Islamic education.

Based on the description above, this study aims to identify and analyze the activities of Aqidah Akhlak teachers in shaping students' religious character at MTS Laboratorium Jambi, while also exploring the support of the madrasa environment for this process. Specifically, this study answers two main questions: (1) How do the activities of Aqidah Akhlak teachers shape students' religious character at MTS Laboratorium Jambi? (2) How does the madrasa environment support the role of Aqidah Akhlak teachers in shaping students' religious character? The contributions of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this research enriches the integration of (Lickona, 2012) character education theory and (Bandura, 1969) social learning with Islamic pedagogy and (Deal & Peterson, 2016) school culture theory, particularly in the context of Indonesian madrasas (Wahyudi et al., 2024). Practically, the research results provide an empirical model of contextual religious character formation, as a guide for other madrasas in optimizing the role of Akidah Akhlak teachers in producing a generation with noble character.

2. METHODS

This research adopted a qualitative approach with a single case study design to in-depth describe the role of the *Akidah Akhlak* teacher in shaping the religious character of students at Madrasah Tsanawiyah Laboratorium in Jambi City (Abdurrahman, 2024). This design was chosen because it allowed for a holistic exploration of the phenomenon in a natural context through multiple data sources, as recommended by (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on specific considerations, such as in-depth knowledge of the topic and strategic position (Sugiyono, 2015). The key informants consisted of one Akidah Akhlak teacher (with at least 5 years of teaching experience), 15 students in grades VII–IX (who are active in religious activities), and supporting informants—including the madrasah principal, a curriculum representative, and a guidance counselor—for a total of 19 people.

Data collection was conducted over three months (January–March 2026) through triangulation of three main techniques (Meleong, 2021) 23 sessions of semi-structured in-depth interviews (45–60 minutes in duration, recorded and transcribed), 12 sessions of participant observation (a total of 24 hours) in the *Aqidah Akhlak* (Islamic Religious Education) class, the Islamic Religious Council (*Rohis*) activities, and the Dhuha prayer, and documentation analysis of 15 documents, including lesson plans, Islamic Religious Council (*Rohis*) reports, and guidance and counseling notes.

Data analysis followed the iterative model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), conducted interactively until data saturation (Bastian et al., 2018). The process included: (1) data reduction through open coding (identifying initial codes) and axial coding (connecting categories); (2) data presentation in a matrix of themes and narratives; and (3) verification through inductive theme development. Coding was assisted by NVivo 12 software for efficient data management.

The trustworthiness and validity of the data were ensured through source triangulation (teachers, students, stakeholders), member checking with transcript validation with participants, peer debriefing

with two supervisors, and a complete audit trail through a logbook (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Research ethics were strictly maintained through written informed consent procedures from all participants and their parents, assurance of anonymity using pseudonyms, the right to withdraw at any time, and institutional approval from the principal (Weyant, 2022).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

MTs' Laboratorium was established on March 4, 2010, under the Establishment Decree No. Kd.05.10/6/PP.00/241/2010, and operates under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Madrasah Tsanawiyah Labor was founded as part of an effort to create an Islamic educational institution capable of responding to the challenges of the times. Since its founding, MTs Labor has been committed to integrating general and Islamic education into a comprehensive, high-quality learning system. With the support of professional educators and a conducive learning environment, MTs Labor has grown into a leading madrasah in both academic and non-academic achievements. The curriculum implemented adheres to national standards, with an emphasis on Islamic values, character, and the development of 21st-century skills. Currently, MTs Labor continues to innovate and evolve, becoming the top choice for parents and students seeking a balanced education that integrates knowledge, faith, and moral character.

Based on the results of a study conducted at MTs Lab in Jambi City regarding the Role of Aqidah and Akhlak Teachers through interviews, observations, and documentation, the researcher will present an overview of the Role of Aqidah Teachers in Shaping Students' Religious Character as follows:

3.1.1 Activities and Exemplary Behavior of Faith and Moral Teachers in Shaping Students' Religious Character

a. Teachers as Moral Role Models

During the three-month observation period, the researchers noted that teachers consistently carried out religious routines such as performing the Dhuha prayer at 7:00 a.m. at the madrasah mosque, implemented the 5S culture (smile, greeting, politeness, courtesy), and encouraged students' voluntary participation in Yasinan, Tilawah, Tahfidz, and PHBI activities. In daily interactions, at least five demonstrative moments were recorded, such as when a teacher gently reprimanded a student for using harsh language, and a few days later the same student was seen apologizing to his friend without being asked. Teachers were also consistently seen arriving early for Dhuha prayer, and gradually some students began to follow this habit. When conflicts arose among students, the teacher acted as a mediator with a calm and patient demeanor, and several students later reported that they used similar approaches to resolve disputes with their peers. The teacher also frequently praised students for their honesty in front of the class, after which more students openly admitted their mistakes. Every morning, the teacher greeted each student by name, and this practice was subsequently adopted by the students as they began greeting one another, as well as the teacher and their peers. Supporting documents, such as the madrasah schedule, demonstrate the structured implementation of Dhuha prayer and the 5S culture, as well as attendance records showing students' voluntary participation in the Yasinan and Tahfidz programs.

As stated by Mr. Rahmat, a teacher at the school, *"A teacher, as an educator must have a strong character and serve as a role model for students."* MTs Lab students also stated: *"Teachers demonstrate religious values through their words and actions, such as making it a habit to greet others, praying before and after class and reminding students to be honest, polite, and respectful."*

b. Pedagogical Innovation and the Internalization of Religious Values

In one of the observed learning sessions, students acted out a scenario involving peer pressure to spread false information on social media, which was followed by a group discussion grounded in Islamic ethics. The teacher used Quizizz three times during the observation period, and students were seen competing enthusiastically as they answered questions about moral dilemmas. The teacher also

consistently used real-world examples, such as honesty in online transactions, rather than merely abstract theories. The lesson plans (RPP) reviewed showed explicit integration of the “real-life simulation” and “Quizizz” methods. Student worksheets also included reflective questions requiring them to apply moral values in personal contexts. Additionally, another finding from the researcher’s interview with one of the teachers at MTs Labor, Mr. Rahmat, stated: *“As teachers, we must have a deep understanding of the material and convey it using effective methods—through discussions, simulations, or Quizizz quizzes that use real-life examples integrated with Islamic values.”* Students at MTs Labor also added that: *“Teachers often offer advice and reminders about the importance of good character and worship in daily life, as well as explain the benefits for one and others.”*

c. Spiritual Guidance and Counseling

Researchers observed weekly small-group sessions in which students shared personal challenges, such as family conflicts or academic stress, and received guidance grounded in Islamic teachings. During Quranic reflection sessions, students were seen taking personal notes on verses related to patience and honesty. Extracurricular attendance records showed consistent participation in Tahfidz and Yasinan activities. School counseling logs also indicated regular face-to-face sessions between teachers and students, with notes on the moral and emotional themes discussed, as well as an extracurricular schedule confirming the existence of spiritual activities outside of regular class hours.

Another finding the researcher obtained from an interview with one of the teachers at MTs Labor, Mr. Rahmat, was that As an Akidah Akhlak teacher who guides students... personal guidance such as moral reflection, Quranic contemplation, and extracurricular memorization is quite effective. Students at MTs Labor also added that Teachers don’t just teach theory; they also continuously support students in school activities both inside and outside of school guiding us in developing honesty, discipline, and mutual respect.

d. Motivational Reinforcement

Teachers were observed offering verbal praise—both in front of the class and privately—to students who consistently performed their prayers or memorized new verses. Stories about the compassion and patience of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) were shared during lessons, and students then discussed how they could apply similar qualities. One student who had previously avoided praying in congregation began to participate after receiving encouragement and small rewards. The teacher’s anecdotal notes document individual student progress and the motivational strategies employed. Students’ reflection journals, which are part of their class assignments, contain expressions of gratitude for the encouragement provided by the teacher. Additionally, another finding from the researcher’s interview with one of the teachers at MTs Labor, Mr. Rahmat, stated that This can motivate students to perform better; always recognize students for every effort... when performing prayers, memorizing the Quran, and other religious activities. Furthermore, a student at MTs Labor added: *“The teacher motivates me to behave in a religious manner in a positive and constructive way.”*

e. Institutional and Inter-Teacher Collaboration

The researcher observed that teachers from various subjects participated in the morning Dhuha prayer together. PHBI activities involved many teachers, with Akidah Akhlak teachers playing a leading role in their planning and implementation. The 5S culture is evident not only in the classrooms but also in the administrative offices and school hallways. The school activity schedule lists joint religious activities along with a list of participating teachers. The minutes of teachers’ meetings include discussions on integrating moral values into non-religious subjects, indicating that collaboration is not merely administrative but is also realized through the consistent participation of teachers. Additionally, another finding from the researcher’s interview with one of the teachers at MTs Labor—Mr. Rahmat—stated that: *“The Akidah Akhlak teacher at MTs Lab Jambi sets an example by initiating the Dhuha prayer... so that some of them voluntarily join without being forced.”* Ms. Siti, a teacher at MTs Labor, also added: *“I joined the Dhuha prayer because I saw Mr. Rahmat’s example. Over time, I felt the benefits, and I eventually instilled those values of discipline in my own teaching as well.”*

3.1.2 Activities and Exemplary Behavior of Faith and Moral Teachers in Shaping Students' Religious Character

a. School Program

The researchers observed that the congregational Dhuha prayer at 7:00 a.m. at the mosque was led by the Akidah Akhlak teacher. Initially, student participation was low, but it increased as the teacher routinely explained the virtues of the Dhuha prayer during ethics lessons, so that students felt a sense of peace and continued to participate. Congregational Zuhur prayer also went well thanks to the call to prayer and WhatsApp reminders; after three months, students had become accustomed to praying without reminders and leaving class on time.

Islamic commemorative events such as the Prophet's Birthday and Isra Mi'raj involved students and parents in skits moderated by the Akidah and Akhlak teacher, helping students gain a deeper understanding of the significance of these events. The Ramadan intensive program successfully guided students in memorizing the Qur'an, and even after the program ended, students continued to memorize regularly at home. Weekly Rohis religious study sessions encouraged students to actively participate in religious activities in their local communities.

The 5S culture (smile, greeting, greeting others, politeness, and courtesy) spreads through the example set by the Akidah Akhlak teachers, with students responding to greetings enthusiastically—a practice that extends even beyond the school grounds. The rule requiring students who arrive late to recite the Asmaul Husna has drastically reduced tardiness rates because it is carried out conscientiously. All activities are supported by structured documentation such as schedules, attendance records, and photographic documentation that demonstrate student enthusiasm and the consistency of the religious program at MTs Lab. This is further supported by a statement from the principal, Mr. Habib, who said: *"The school has prepared various programs to support the development of students' religious character."* These programs include religious practices such as congregational Duha prayer, congregational Zuhur prayer, celebrations of major religious holidays, and religious activities such as short-term Islamic boarding school programs and religious study sessions. In addition, the school also instills religious values through school culture, teachers' exemplary behavior, and the enforcement of rules that reflect noble moral values."

b. Collaboration Between Akidah Akhlak Teachers and Subject Teachers in Schools

The researcher observed that the weekly integrated lesson plan meetings at MA Lab Jambi resulted in concrete synchronization. The Arabic teacher incorporated verse 135 of Surah An-Nisa—which addresses justice—into conversation exercises. Based on classroom observations, students began using expressions that reflect the value of justice in their daily conversations, such as when discussing topics or resolving minor conflicts with peers.

The English teacher integrated the story of Abu Bakr al-Siddiq into reading comprehension activities. In interviews, several students mentioned that they were inspired by Abu Bakr's honesty and strive to apply it in their daily lives, such as by taking exams without cheating.

The math teacher designed problems for calculating zakat al-mal using the nisab formula of 85 grams of gold, which was then followed by an explanation of the wisdom behind social responsibility by the Akidah and Ethics teacher. Students appeared more enthusiastic about working on the math problems because they felt the lesson had a direct connection to real life. Some students also reported that they began calculating zakat on their own after understanding the concept.

The science lesson on the water cycle began with a reflection on Quranic Surah Az-Zumar: 21 regarding the mercy of creation. Students appeared more focused and showed a sense of wonder while studying the water cycle, as they connected it to the power of Allah. The science teacher reported that students asked questions more actively and showed greater interest in the material following this reflection.

Supporting documents, such as lesson plans from various subjects, demonstrated the explicit integration of Islamic values into the learning plans. Teacher notes also indicate that students find it easier to understand the material when it is linked to religious values. This is further supported by the results of the researcher's interviews with teachers of other subjects at MTs Labor, where they stated

that The Aqidah and Ethics teacher coordinates with teachers of other subjects to align religious values in every lesson. For example, in Arabic or science classes, teachers can emphasize the values of honesty, responsibility, and mutual respect." As Ms. Rina also noted: *"After coordinating with the Akidah Akhlak teacher, I began the lesson on the water cycle by reflecting on Quranic verse Az-Zumar: 21. The students became more focused and enthusiastic about asking questions because they saw the connection between science and the greatness of Allah."*

c. Interdisciplinary Activities

Researchers observed the Islamic Science Fair, which brought together science teachers and teachers of Islamic Beliefs and Ethics for an exhibition on photosynthesis interspersed with reflections on Quranic Surah An-Nahl: 68–69 regarding the wisdom of bees. Students presented both scientific data and the spiritual significance of creation, thereby deepening their understanding and fostering a greater appreciation for Allah's creation. Next, an English debate competition on the theme of "Islamic Ethics" combined intelligent argumentation with digital ethics drawn from Quranic Surah Al-Hujurat: 11–12 regarding backbiting and slander. Students not only improved their debating skills but also became more cautious in their use of social media after participating in this activity. Additionally, the Zakat Math Olympiad combined the nisab formula of 85 grams of gold with the wisdom of productive infaq. Students were enthusiastic because they not only learned mathematics but also understood the practical application of zakat in daily life, making concepts like percentages and ratios easier to grasp.

Furthermore, the drama performance of Prophet Yusuf combined the visual arts with an analysis of Prophet Yusuf's (AS) moral qualities—truthfulness, patience, and forgiveness. The students involved demonstrated a deep understanding of the values of patience and forgiveness and were inspired to be more patient in facing daily trials. All of these activities were supported by supporting documents, including proposals, photographic documentation, and evaluation notes, which demonstrate a collaborative program that was carefully planned and evaluated on a regular basis. Teachers' evaluation notes also confirm that these activities successfully enhanced students' understanding of the meaningful connection between science and religion. As stated by subject teachers at MTs Labor Jambi during interviews with the researcher: *"In school activities such as religious holiday celebrations, competitions, or character-building programs, Akidah Akhlak teachers collaborate with other teachers to organize joint programs, such as religious study sessions, mentoring, competitions, or character-building activities."*

d. Student Guidance

The researchers observed that guidance for at-risk students is provided collaboratively by three parties: the guidance counselor, the Akidah Akhlak teacher, and the homeroom teacher. In cases of chronic tardiness, the guidance counselor identifies the root causes (laziness, family issues, or bad company), while the Akidah Akhlak teacher leads a reflection on Surah Al-Asr regarding the value of time, the practice of Duha prayer, and a discussion of the hadith about the two blessings that are often neglected. The homeroom teacher monitors daily attendance through prayer attendance records and group projects. As a result, students who were previously often late began to show improvement in time discipline after reflecting on Surah Al-Asr.

In cases where students skipped prayers, the guidance counselor provided general encouragement, the Akidah Akhlak teacher personally invited the student to pray in congregation for a week, and the homeroom teacher recorded prayer attendance. After several weeks of intensive support, the student resumed regular prayer and demonstrated positive behavioral changes as well as enthusiasm for participating in religious activities.

Bullying cases were addressed by the guidance counselor through emotional mediation; the Aqidah and Akhlak teacher discussed Surah Al-Hujurat: 11–12 regarding backbiting; and the homeroom teacher facilitated a social project with the victims. Inter-student relationships improved, the victims felt more supported, and the guidance counselor noted that there were no further reports of bullying from that class.

For students who were lazy, the guidance counselor helped set academic goals, the Akidah Akhlak teacher taught a prayer for protection from laziness (ta'awudz), and the homeroom teacher

provided academic support. The students' academic grades improved significantly, and parents reported that their children were studying more diligently at home.

All of this support was supplemented by a character-building pocket guide containing a daily checklist, therapeutic verses, and weekly progress reports. The guidance counselor's records show that the majority of at-risk students successfully returned to normal behavior within about two months, as evidenced by regular prayer attendance, improved grades, and positive behavioral changes that were also acknowledged by their classmates. This is further supported by a statement from the school principal, Mr. Habib, who said: "The Akidah Akhlak teachers, together with the guidance counselors and homeroom teachers, provide guidance to students who need moral and religious guidance, making character development more focused and consistent."

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Akidah Akhlak teachers play a central and multidimensional role in shaping students' religious character at MTs Laboratorium Jambi. Their role is not limited to delivering religious knowledge in the classroom but extends to modeling moral behavior, guiding students spiritually, motivating religious practice, innovating instruction, and collaborating with other school actors. This finding strengthens Lickona's view that character education involves moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, because students do not merely receive moral concepts cognitively but are also encouraged to internalize and practice them in daily school life (Lickona, 2012). In this context, the Akidah Akhlak teacher becomes a mediator between religious values and students' lived experiences.

One of the strongest findings is the importance of teacher role modeling. The teacher's consistency in arriving early for Dhuha prayer, greeting students, using polite language, giving gentle reprimands, and praising honesty provides concrete examples of religious values in practice. This confirms Bandura's social learning theory, which argues that students learn behavior through observation, imitation, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1969). In the madrasah context, teacher modeling is particularly influential because religious authority and moral credibility are attached to the teacher's daily conduct. Students are more likely to imitate values when those values are repeatedly demonstrated in visible, consistent, and emotionally meaningful ways. Therefore, religious character formation depends not only on what teachers teach but also on how they behave in the school environment.

The study also shows that pedagogical innovation helps bridge abstract religious concepts and students' real-life moral challenges. The use of simulations, moral dilemma discussions, digital quizzes, and contextual examples such as honesty in online transactions enables students to connect Islamic values with contemporary issues. This supports the idea that character education becomes more meaningful when learning is contextual, participatory, and connected to students' social realities (Septiwiharti et al., 2024). The use of technology such as Quizizz also shows that religious education can adapt to students' learning preferences without losing its moral and spiritual orientation. However, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Although students appeared more engaged and reflective, the study does not yet provide longitudinal evidence that these strategies produce lasting behavioral change. Thus, pedagogical innovation should be understood as supporting the internalization process rather than as direct proof of long-term character transformation.

Spiritual guidance and counseling emerged as another important mechanism in religious character formation. Through small-group guidance, Qur'anic reflection, personal counseling, Tahfidz, and Yasinan activities, teachers created spaces where students could discuss personal, emotional, and moral problems. This finding is consistent with Islamic educational thought that positions teachers not only as instructors but also as murabbi, namely figures who nurture students' intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth (Muzaki et al., 2025). The collaboration between Akidah Akhlak teachers, guidance counselors, and homeroom teachers also demonstrates that student problems such as tardiness, skipping prayers, bullying, and low motivation require integrated support. Moral problems cannot be addressed only through discipline; they require spiritual reflection, emotional assistance, and continuous behavioral monitoring.

The findings further indicate that motivation plays an important role in helping students move from external compliance to internal awareness. Students were encouraged to participate in religious activities through Verbal praise, inspirational stories of the Prophet Muhammad, personal encouragement, and small rewards. This aligns with research showing that religious behavior is more sustainable when individuals attach personal meaning to it rather than merely responding to external pressure (Neyrinck et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the study suggests that motivation must be carefully managed. Excessive reliance on rewards may produce temporary compliance, while meaningful guidance and reflection may help students develop intrinsic religious commitment. Therefore, teachers need to combine encouragement with opportunities for students to understand the personal, social, and spiritual significance of religious practices.

Another significant finding is that the madrasah environment strengthens the role of Akidah Akhlak teachers through structured programs, teacher collaboration, cross-curricular activities, and integrated mentoring. The routine implementation of Dhuha prayer, congregational Zuhur prayer, 5S culture, PHBI activities, Rohis, and Ramadan programs reflects the importance of school culture in character education. Deal and Peterson (2016) argue that school culture shapes shared norms, values, and practices that influence students' behavior. In this study, religious character was not formed through isolated classroom instruction but through a "living madrasah" ecosystem where religious values were embedded in routines, relationships, rules, and institutional programs.

Collaboration among teachers also created a multiplier effect. Islamic values were integrated into Arabic, English, mathematics, science, and interdisciplinary activities such as the Islamic Science Fair, Zakat Math Olympiad, Islamic ethics debate, and Prophet Yusuf drama. This finding shows that religious character education becomes stronger when it is not treated as the sole responsibility of Akidah Akhlak teachers. Instead, it requires collective commitment across subjects and school programs. This is consistent with the view that sustainable educational change requires shared vision, coordination, and institutional support rather than individual teacher effort alone (Fullan, 2016).

Overall, this study contributes to the literature on Islamic character education by showing that students' religious character is shaped through the interaction between teacher agency and madrasah ecology. The Akidah Akhlak teacher functions as a role model, innovator, counselor, motivator, and collaborator, while the madrasah environment provides structural support through programs, culture, and inter-teacher coordination. However, the findings are limited to a single case study and therefore cannot be generalized broadly. Future research should examine similar practices across different madrasahs, involve students with varying levels of religious participation, and explore the long-term sustainability of religious character formation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Akidah Akhlak* teachers play a multidimensional role in shaping students' religious character at MTs Laboratorium Jambi through exemplary behavior, pedagogical innovation, spiritual counseling, motivational reinforcement, and collaboration with other school stakeholders. The findings show that religious character formation is not produced by classroom instruction alone, but through the synergy between teachers' consistent moral role modeling and a supportive madrasah environment, including structured religious programs, cross-curricular value integration, teacher collaboration, and integrated student mentoring. These practices contribute to the development of students' discipline, honesty, responsibility, worship habits, and social awareness. However, this study is limited by its single-case design, the relatively small number of participants, and the focus on students who were mostly active in religious activities, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other madrasah contexts. In addition, the study does not yet measure the long-term sustainability of students' religious character development. Future research is therefore recommended to conduct comparative studies across different madrasahs, involve students with diverse levels of religious participation, and use longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine how teacher role modeling and madrasah culture influence students' religious character over time.

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