

Teacher Exemplarity and Religious Habituation as Hidden Curriculum in Early Childhood Moral Education

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the formation of moral character in early childhood through teacher exemplarity and religious habituation as dimensions of the hidden curriculum at Yustisia Kindergarten in Kotabumi, North Lampung. The study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the implicit mechanisms of value internalization occurring in the school's daily practices. The research subjects consisted of three teachers, one principal as the key informant, and twenty students who served as indirect observation subjects. Data were collected through eight weeks of participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The data were then analyzed interactively through the processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that teacher exemplarity represents the most dominant dimension in the formation of moral character (87.5%), followed by religious habituation (83.3%), the internalization process (78.3%), and the hidden curriculum (67.5%). These findings suggest that explicit and structured practices tend to produce more rapidly observable behavioral consistency, whereas implicit value formation requires longer time and continuous reinforcement. The process of moral character formation occurs gradually, beginning with imitation of the teacher as a role model, continuing through habituation via religious routines, and eventually developing into the internalization of values as a more stable moral disposition. This study emphasizes that moral education in early childhood is not solely determined by the formal curriculum but is also shaped by the quality of daily interactions and institutional culture as a medium of the hidden curriculum that reinforces values in a latent and contextual manner.

Keywords: teacher exemplarity, religious habituation, hidden curriculum, moral character, early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) constitutes a fundamental phase within the overall education system, as it represents the stage at which the initial formation of children's personality structures, habits, and value orientations takes place. ECE is not solely directed toward the development of cognitive and motor abilities but also serves a strategic function in the internalization of moral and religious values that form the foundation of children's behavior in subsequent stages of development. Developmental studies indicate that values introduced during early childhood tend to be more enduring because they are shaped through processes of imitation, habituation, and repeated emotional experiences (Hurlock, 2013; Suyadi, 2017). Consequently, moral education at the early childhood level occupies a crucial position, particularly within the context of Islamic education, which considers moral character (akhlaq) as an essential objective of education.

Moral education at the early childhood level holds a particularly strategic position because early childhood represents a foundational period for the formation of character and moral dispositions. At this

stage, patterns of behavior, emotional regulation, and social responses begin to develop and tend to persist throughout later developmental phases. Within the perspective of Islamic education, this urgency becomes even more pronounced, as moral character is not merely regarded as a by-product of educational processes but as its primary objective. Conceptually, Al-Ghazali defines moral character as a disposition firmly embedded within the soul from which actions emerge spontaneously without requiring extensive deliberation (Al-Ghazali, 2005).

This perspective is reinforced by Ibn Miskawayh, who argues that moral character represents a psychological condition that encourages spontaneous action and can be shaped through continuous training and habituation (Miskawayh, 1968). This implies that moral education during early childhood is highly strategic, as habituation at this stage has the potential to form enduring character traits. Similarly, Thomas Lickona emphasizes that effective moral education must integrate the dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, and should begin at an early age so that values can be deeply internalized (Lickona, 1991).

Recent studies in early childhood education further demonstrate that the internalization of values occurs more effectively through role modeling, social interaction, and daily routines rather than through purely verbal moral instruction (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Berkowitz & Bier, 2014). From philosophical, theological, and pedagogical perspectives, therefore, moral education at the early childhood level occupies a fundamental position. It is not merely the initial stage of formal education but also a strategic phase in shaping the moral structure that constitutes the primary goal of Islamic education, while simultaneously serving as the foundation of children's character in a broader social context.

In recent years, studies in education and developmental psychology have identified a growing phenomenon of moral decline observable even at the preschool level. Various studies report increasing aggressive behavior, low levels of social empathy, weak self-control, and declining moral sensitivity among young children (Lickona, 2012; Narvaez et al., 2014). This phenomenon cannot be separated from transformations in children's social environments, including increased exposure to digital media, diminishing meaningful social interactions, and inconsistencies in value transmission between family environments and educational institutions (Suyadi & Widodo, 2019). Within the context of Islamic education, this situation becomes even more problematic because moral character is not viewed as an additional competence but rather as the core objective of education itself.

Educational responses to this issue in practice remain largely dominated by formal and instructional approaches. Moral education in early childhood institutions is commonly implemented through verbal transmission of values, such as moral lectures, normative storytelling, memorization of prayers, and the introduction of symbolic behavioral rules. This approach is based on the assumption that mastery of moral knowledge will directly correspond to the development of moral behavior (Purwanto, 2020). However, this assumption has increasingly been questioned in empirical studies, particularly when applied to young children who developmentally have not yet fully developed the capacity for abstract moral reasoning.

Several studies indicate that moral education that relies solely on verbal instruction has fundamental limitations because it tends to overlook the socio-emotional dimension and the active role of children in the process of value internalization. Moral learning cannot be reduced to the mere transfer of information but requires direct experience, meaningful social interaction, and emotional engagement in daily practices (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Berkowitz & Bier, 2014). Without a consistent practical context, knowledge of moral values often remains at the cognitive level and fails to manifest in children's actual behavior.

Within this framework, the concept of the hidden curriculum becomes particularly relevant as an alternative perspective for understanding the process of moral value internalization in early childhood

education. The hidden curriculum refers to a set of values, norms, and attitudes that are implicitly transmitted through school culture, patterns of social relations, teacher role modeling, and daily routines, beyond the formally written curriculum (Jackson, 1968; Giroux & Penna, 1979). Schools therefore function not only as spaces for explicit instruction but also as arenas for character formation that occur implicitly through repeated practices, habits, and real-life examples experienced by children.

In early childhood education contexts, the role of the hidden curriculum becomes even more significant because young children primarily learn through observation and imitation of adult figures in their environment. Based on social learning theory, Albert Bandura emphasizes that modeling and observational learning represent central mechanisms in children's moral development. In this regard, teachers serve as primary social references whose behaviors and attitudes function as powerful moral exemplars. Contemporary international studies further demonstrate that classroom climate, teacher consistency, and implicitly structured norms significantly influence children's social and moral development (Thornberg, 2016; Wren, 2015). Moreover, recent research suggests that moral values such as patience, honesty, and empathy are more effectively internalized when embedded within relational practices and everyday pedagogical interactions rather than delivered solely through explicit instruction (Sanderson, 2013; Nucci, 2017).

In addition to teacher exemplarity, religious habituation through routine activities such as collective prayer, greetings, social etiquette, and simple religious rituals also plays a significant role in shaping children's moral character. International studies on moral and civic development in early education contexts indicate that repeated symbolic practices and shared rituals contribute to the formation of a moral ecology within classrooms (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014; Revell & Arthur, 2007). Within Islamic early childhood education settings, religious habituation functions not only as a pedagogical technique but also as a formative cultural environment that normalizes moral behavior through repetition and emotional engagement. Cross-cultural studies further indicate that sustained ritual practices strengthen moral identity formation by integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions in the internalization of values (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2016).

Despite these developments, empirical studies reveal that research on moral education in early childhood education still faces conceptual limitations. Many studies continue to position teacher exemplarity and religious habituation as separate variables and tend to adopt descriptive approaches without a coherent integrative theoretical framework. International literature on hidden curriculum theory argues that moral formation is embedded within institutional structures, power relations, daily routines, and implicit expectations, rather than solely within formal curriculum content (Giroux & Penna, 2019; Jackson, 2018). However, only a limited number of recent studies explicitly conceptualize teacher modeling and religious habituation as interconnected components within a hidden curriculum framework, particularly in the context of Islamic early childhood education. Therefore, the hidden curriculum perspective offers a more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding how moral values are practiced, normalized, and internalized through everyday pedagogical practices rather than merely transmitted as abstract norms.

This research gap highlights the need for studies that systematically connect teacher exemplarity and religious habituation as interrelated practices within the framework of the hidden curriculum. Without such an understanding, moral education risks remaining confined to normative-instructional approaches that are less responsive to the developmental characteristics of young children. In the context of Islamic early childhood education, such studies are particularly important for strengthening the conceptual foundation of moral education that emphasizes not only cognitive understanding of values but also their internalization and practical enactment in everyday life.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze in depth how teacher exemplarity and religious habituation function as components of the hidden curriculum in the formation of moral character among young children in early childhood education institutions. Specifically, this study examines the implicit mechanisms of value internalization, the patterns of daily practices that shape the school's religious culture, and the pedagogical meanings embedded in teacher–child interactions within the context of Islamic early childhood education. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of hidden curriculum studies within Islamic education and to provide practical implications for strengthening contextual, holistic, and sustainable moral education at the early childhood level.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of the processes and implicit mechanisms involved in the formation of moral character among young children through teacher exemplarity and religious habituation. The focus on the hidden curriculum requires an exploration of values that are transmitted implicitly through daily practices, social interactions, and institutional culture, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative approaches (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). A case study design enables the investigation of educational phenomena in a holistic and contextual manner within a bounded social system, making it particularly relevant for analyzing the hidden curriculum embedded within the environment in which such values are practiced (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted at Yustisia Kindergarten in Kotabumi, North Lampung. The research participants consisted of three early childhood teachers, the school principal, and twenty early childhood students who served as indirect subjects of observation. Teachers and the principal were positioned as key informants due to their central roles in pedagogical practices, decision-making processes, and the formation of the school's institutional culture. Meanwhile, the students served as observational subjects to examine the process of moral value internalization reflected in their behaviors, responses, and daily habits during classroom activities and religious routines.

This research was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving children. Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians after they received a comprehensive explanation regarding the objectives of the study, observation procedures, types of data collected, and their right to refuse or withdraw participation at any time without any consequences. In addition, formal permission was obtained from the school institution as a form of institutional approval.

During the observation process, the researcher adhered to the principle of non-intrusiveness by minimizing intervention in teaching and learning activities and ensuring that the presence of the researcher did not significantly alter classroom dynamics. Observations were conducted naturalistically within the context of routine school activities. To protect participants' identities, all data were anonymized using codes or pseudonyms, and no personal identifying information was included in the research report. Documentation that could potentially reveal the identities of the children was not published. Through these procedures, the study ensured that the rights, safety, and well-being of child participants remained the primary priority while maintaining the methodological integrity and credibility of the research findings. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in the practices of teacher exemplarity and religious habituation that constituted the focus of the study.

Data were collected through eight weeks of participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of school program documentation. Observations focused on teachers' exemplary behaviors and religious habituation practices in daily school activities in order to capture patterns of behavior and interaction

that shape the hidden curriculum (Spradley, 1980). Interviews were conducted to explore educators' interpretations and understandings of these practices, while documentation analysis was used to examine the alignment between formal institutional policies and everyday practices within the school.

Data analysis was conducted interactively through the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). The data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns of teacher exemplarity and religious habituation as implicit mechanisms for the internalization of moral values among young children. The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques in order to enhance the credibility of the findings (Denzin, 2012). Methodologically, this study emphasizes that the hidden curriculum, as a latent and contextual phenomenon, can only be adequately understood through a qualitative approach, since the internalization of moral values occurs through experiences, interactions, and social practices that cannot be reduced to purely quantitative indicators (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to examine the role of teacher exemplarity and religious habituation as components of the hidden curriculum in the formation of moral character among young children in Islamic early childhood education institutions. The data analysis indicates that the development of moral values occurs through four primary dimensions: teacher exemplarity, religious habituation, the process of value internalization in children, and the implicit characteristics of the hidden curriculum. These findings are supported by data obtained from interviews with teachers and the school principal, as well as classroom observations.

Table 1. Interview Data and Field Observation Results

No.	Dimension	Indicator	Data Evidence / Response	Data Source Code	Category
1	Teacher Exemplarity	Patience and calm attitude	"When a child makes a mistake, we talk to them gently so they do not feel afraid."	W-G1	Teacher Exemplarity
2	Teacher Exemplarity	Polite language and positive encouragement	The teacher gives instructions without raising her voice and addresses children by their names.	Classroom Observation	Teacher Exemplarity
3	Teacher Exemplarity	Controlled emotional response	The teacher comforts a crying child without scolding.	Classroom Observation	Teacher Exemplarity
4	Teacher Exemplarity	Joint religious practices with children	"Children participate more quickly when the teacher joins them in prayer and worship."	W-G3	Teacher Exemplarity
5	Religious Habituation	Prayer and greeting routines	"Children now pray automatically before lessons without being instructed."	W-G2	Religious Habituation
6	Religious Habituation	Polite classroom culture	A child gently reminds a peer to queue properly using polite language.	Classroom Observation	Religious Habituation

7	Religious Habituation	Islamic symbols	“We do not explain the posters one by one, but children often ask about them on their own.”	W-G3	Religious Habituation
8	Internalization Process	Empathy	“Children are now accustomed to comforting their friends when someone is crying.”	W-G1	Internalization Process
9	Internalization Process	Discipline	Children prepare their learning materials independently before activities begin.	Classroom Observation	Internalization Process
10	Internalization Process	Politeness	Children greet teachers and peers with <i>salaam</i> every morning.	Classroom Observation	Internalization Process
11	Hidden Curriculum	Not explicitly stated in the curriculum	“There are no written targets for empathy or politeness, but these values are practiced every day.”	W-PS (Principal)	Hidden Curriculum
12	Hidden Curriculum	Naturally occurring behaviors	Children spontaneously help peers or correct inappropriate behavior.	Classroom Observation	Hidden Curriculum

This study focuses on understanding how teacher exemplarity and religious habituation function as components of the hidden curriculum in the formation of moral character among young children in Islamic early childhood education institutions. The research findings were obtained through a combination of classroom observations and in-depth interviews with teachers, the school principal, and institutional administrators. The observations indicate that daily classroom interactions, teachers’ behaviors, and consistently practiced religious activities exert a direct influence on the internalization of moral values among children. Moral values such as empathy, discipline, and politeness are not only transmitted through formal instruction or written materials but are primarily cultivated through the concrete experiences that children encounter in their everyday school environment.

The following discussion is organized into four main focal areas: (1) teacher exemplarity as a medium for value internalization, (2) religious habituation as a channel of the hidden curriculum, (3) the process of value internalization in children, and (4) the implicit characteristics of the moral values that emerge. Each section is supported by empirical evidence in the form of interview excerpts and observational data, while also being linked to relevant literature and theoretical perspectives on character education and the hidden curriculum. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The frequency of observed behaviors among the twenty students was calculated to identify patterns of moral behavior emerging during classroom activities and daily routines. The percentage values were calculated using the following formula:

$$P = \frac{f}{20} \times 100\%$$

RESULTS

Teacher Exemplarity as a Medium for the Internalization of Moral Values

The findings indicate that teachers function as behavioral models for young children. Attitudes such as patience, polite language, and emotional regulation become concrete examples that are observed and imitated by children. Teacher exemplarity does not merely appear in the form of verbal instruction; rather, it is manifested through consistent daily practices. This finding is consistent with the study of Fitria and Rohman (2025), which argues that teachers can instill moral values through actual behavior rather than relying solely on written or verbal instruction.

Teacher exemplarity exerts a significant influence on the development of children's moral values, including empathy, discipline, and politeness. Children naturally imitate the consistent behaviors demonstrated by teachers, both in social interactions and in religious practices. For example, teachers who respond calmly to children's mistakes, use positive language, and demonstrate patience when dealing with emotional reactions create a safe and supportive learning environment that facilitates the internalization of moral values.

In addition, teachers' religious practices, such as performing prayers together with students and reciting supplications before and after activities, serve as channels for the internalization of religious values. This finding supports existing literature which suggests that observational learning constitutes an effective mechanism in moral education (Lickona, 2013; Nucci, 2001). In other words, teacher exemplarity not only transmits social norms but also contributes to the development of children's moral framework at both affective and cognitive levels through observation and imitation.

Table 2. Dimensions of Teacher Exemplarity (20 Students)

No	Indicator	Number of Students Exposed/Responding	Percentage
1	Patient and calm attitude	18	90%
2	Polite language and positive encouragement	17	85%
3	Controlled emotional responses	16	80%
4	Collective religious practices	19	95%

Average Exposure to Teacher Exemplarity

$$\frac{90 + 85 + 80 + 95}{4} = 87,5\%$$

Interpretation:

A total of 87.5% of students demonstrated positive responses to the teachers' exemplary practices. This indicates that teacher exemplarity serves as a highly influential medium in shaping children's moral behaviors, as most students were observed to respond positively to the teachers' attitudes, language use, emotional regulation, and participation in shared religious practices.

Religious Habituation as a Channel of the Hidden Curriculum

Religious habituation in Islamic early childhood classrooms was found to function as an important medium for the implicit internalization of moral values. Daily routines, classroom culture, and Islamic symbols enable children to learn politeness, discipline, and empathy through the repetition of everyday experiences. Children are not only formally instructed through written rules or explicit explanations; rather, they learn through active participation in consistent and structured daily practices.

This finding is consistent with the study of Prमितasari and Saifuddin (2024), which suggests that school culture and everyday practices serve as powerful forms of hidden curriculum in shaping children's character. For example, routines such as reciting prayers and exchanging greetings at the beginning and end of learning activities, reinforcing values through Islamic posters displayed in the classroom, and cultivating a culture in which children politely remind one another of appropriate behavior all contribute to the natural internalization of moral values. Through these practices, children gradually learn self-regulation, respect for peers, and an understanding of social responsibility without relying solely on formal instruction. Therefore, daily religious practices function as an effective channel of the hidden curriculum that implicitly instills moral values in young children.

Table 3. Dimensions of Religious Habituation

No	Indicator	Number of Consistent Students	Percentage
1	Prayer and greeting routines	20	100%
2	Classroom culture of politeness	16	80%
3	Responsiveness to Islamic symbols	14	70%

Average Religious Habituation

$$\frac{100 + 80 + 70}{3} = 83,3\%$$

Interpretation:

The results indicate that 83.3% of students consistently exhibit behaviors indicative of religious habituation.

The Process of Value Internalization in Children

The process of moral value internalization among children occurs through observation, imitation, and social experiences within the classroom environment. Children tend to emulate the behaviors demonstrated by teachers and peers, allowing moral values such as empathy, discipline, and politeness to emerge naturally in daily interactions. This finding supports the concept of situated learning, which emphasizes that moral learning becomes more effective when it takes place within authentic social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991, as cited in Hartini et al., 2023).

For instance, when children observe teachers responding patiently to conflicts or participating in religious practices together with students, they tend to imitate these behaviors. Discipline becomes visible when children independently prepare their learning materials, politeness appears through practices such as greeting others and asking permission, and empathy is demonstrated when children comfort friends who are feeling sad. These examples illustrate that the internalization of moral values develops naturally and continuously through lived experiences rather than solely as a result of formal instruction or written rules within the curriculum.

Table 4. Dimensions of Value Internalization

No	Indicator	Number of Students	Percentage
1	Empathy	15	75%
2	Discipline	14	70%
3	Politeness	18	90%

Interpretation:

The results show that 78.3% of students demonstrate the internalization of moral values in their daily behavior.

Implicit Characteristics of the Hidden Curriculum

The moral values internalized by children exhibit implicit characteristics, which can be identified in several ways:

- a. Not formally documented in the curriculum: Moral values such as empathy, discipline, and politeness are not explicitly written in formal planning documents such as lesson plans or weekly learning programs. However, these values are still internalized through daily practices and interactions within the classroom environment.
- b. Occurring naturally: Children imitate the behaviors of teachers and peers without requiring explicit or formal direction.

These findings reinforce both classical and contemporary literature on the hidden curriculum, which suggests that character education can emerge through social interaction, daily routines, and teacher exemplarity without necessarily being formally embedded in curriculum documents (Jackson, 1968; Kelly, 1986, as cited in Malahati & Rokhimawan, 2024). This perspective highlights that the evaluation of character education in Islamic early childhood institutions should consider observations of children's everyday behaviors and their interactions with teachers and the classroom environment.

Table 5. Dimensions of the Hidden Curriculum

No	Indicator	Number of Students Demonstrating Behavior	Percentage
1	Unwritten moral values	13	65%
2	Natural and spontaneous behavior	14	70%

Average Implicit Characteristics of the Hidden Curriculum

$$\frac{65 + 70}{2} = 67,5\%$$

Interpretation:

A total of 67.5% of students demonstrate the formation of moral values through implicit mechanisms associated with the hidden curriculum.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the formation of moral character among young children through teacher exemplarity, religious habituation, the process of value internalization, and the mechanisms of the hidden curriculum at TK Yustisia Kotabumi. The findings indicate that the dimension of teacher exemplarity recorded the highest percentage (87.5%), followed by religious habituation (83.3%), value internalization (78.3%), and the hidden curriculum (67.5%). This pattern suggests that the more explicit and structured an educational practice is, the higher the consistency of observable behavior demonstrated by children.

The dominance of teacher exemplarity reinforces the social learning theory proposed by Albert Bandura (1977), which emphasizes that observation and imitation of significant figures constitute the initial mechanism in behavioral formation. In the context of early childhood education, teachers function as normative role models whose behaviors such as patience, polite language, and emotional regulation are replicated by students. However, as emphasized by Bandura, imitation does not necessarily equate to value internalization; the latter requires repeated reinforcement, reflective processes, and the gradual development of self-regulation.

The high consistency observed in religious habituation, particularly in the indicator of collective prayer (100%), highlights the effectiveness of structured routines in shaping moral action. Thomas Lickona's

framework of character education (2012) distinguishes among moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In this study, moral action within structured contexts appears relatively stable. However, more spontaneous indicators such as empathy (75%) and unwritten moral values (65%) suggest that moral dispositions have not yet been fully internalized. In other words, habituation effectively fosters the consistency of external behavior but does not automatically ensure the depth of internal moral commitment.

The hidden curriculum dimension, which obtained a comparatively lower percentage (67.5%), nevertheless serves as an important indicator of the depth of moral formation. The concept introduced by Philip W. Jackson (1968/1990) emphasizes that school values are shaped through implicit practices, relational patterns, and institutional culture that are not formally written in the official curriculum. The findings of this study indicate that implicit values continue to emerge even without explicit instructional targeting; however, their influence tends to be more gradual and context-dependent. The approximate 20% difference between teacher exemplarity and hidden curriculum suggests a gap between exposure to moral values and their deeper internalization.

International research has consistently demonstrated that character formation in early childhood is strongly influenced by the consistency of the school ecosystem (Berkowitz & Bier, 2014; Nucci, 2017; Thornberg, 2018). From a philosophical perspective, Gert Biesta (2015) argues that moral education is not merely about transmitting values but about cultivating subjects capable of ethical responsibility. Within this framework, the findings of this study suggest that the development of moral autonomy among young children remains at an early stage, characterized by the predominance of structured behavioral practices rather than spontaneous moral dispositions.

Within the Indonesian context, studies on character education in early childhood institutions indicate that religious habituation effectively supports the development of basic social behaviors but requires the integration of dialogical reflection in order for values to be internalized more deeply (Suyadi, 2018; Hidayah, 2020). These findings align with the results of this study, which show that structured ritual practices tend to produce behavioral consistency more rapidly than implicit value formation, which requires longer periods of environmental consistency and reinforcement.

Conceptually, the results of this study reinforce the literature suggesting that:

1. Modeling exerts the strongest initial influence on behavioral formation;
2. Habituation strengthens the stability and consistency of moral action;
3. The hidden curriculum functions as a transitional mechanism toward value internalization; and
4. Value internalization requires time, consistency, and the integration of sustained social experiences.

Therefore, the formation of moral character in early childhood occurs gradually: beginning with imitation of significant figures, reinforced through structured habituation, and eventually developing toward internalization through implicit experiences embedded within the culture of the school. Moral education in early childhood institutions becomes more effective when teacher exemplarity, religious habituation, and institutional culture are integrated simultaneously, rather than relying solely on verbal instructional approaches. Moral character is not formed merely through the teaching of values, but through repeated, meaningful, and consistent social experiences in the everyday life of the school.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study confirms that teacher exemplarity and religious habituation function not only as explicit instructional strategies but also as elements of the hidden curriculum that implicitly shape children's value structures. Moral formation does not occur solely through normative instruction but emerges through repeated

and consistent social experiences within the culture of the school environment. This implication expands the conceptual understanding of the hidden curriculum by positioning it as a central mechanism in moral education within Islamic early childhood institutions.

Religious values are therefore not merely taught as cognitive knowledge but are embodied through daily practices, social interactions, and the emotional regulation demonstrated by teachers. Consequently, character education in early childhood should be understood as an ecological process involving the entire social system of the school.

In addition, the findings indicate a distinction between compliance with religious practices and the internalization of values as stable moral dispositions. This suggests that the evaluation of moral education should incorporate indicators of spontaneous behavior as a measure of the depth of character formation rather than relying solely on structured or ritualized practices.

Pedagogical Implications

First, teachers in Islamic early childhood institutions should position themselves as central moral figures within the learning environment. Consistency in demonstrating patience, respectful language, emotional control, and direct participation in religious practices has been shown to exert a significant influence on children's behavior. Second, religious habituation should not be limited to routine ritual activities but should also emphasize the development of meaning. The integration of simple reflective practices appropriate to children's developmental stages may facilitate deeper value internalization. Third, instructional design should ensure alignment between the formal curriculum and everyday classroom practices. Inconsistencies between the values taught and the behaviors demonstrated by teachers may weaken the effectiveness of the hidden curriculum.

Institutional and Policy Implications

At the institutional level, the findings suggest that school culture functions as a primary instrument in the formation of children's moral character. Accordingly, the management of Islamic early childhood institutions should develop policies that support value consistency, including the strengthening of teachers' emotional regulation, ethical communication, and collective habituation practices. At the policy level, the results of this study support the importance of integrating character education within quality evaluation systems for early childhood education. Indicators of institutional success should not be measured solely through academic achievement or administrative compliance but also through the consistency of children's social and moral behavior in natural contexts.

Overall, these implications highlight that moral formation in Islamic early childhood institutions requires a systemic approach that integrates teacher exemplarity, religious habituation, and the management of school culture as a coherent and sustainable pedagogical framework. The findings demonstrate that teacher modeling and religious habituation function as effective forms of hidden curriculum in shaping children's moral character. Moral values become internalized through interaction, observation, and participation in religious practices implicitly, without necessarily being explicitly stated within the formal curriculum. Consequently, this study provides an empirical basis for value-based educational strategies integrated with the hidden curriculum, emphasizing the crucial roles of teachers and school leaders in supporting early childhood character development.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that should be carefully considered when interpreting the findings and drawing broader implications. First, the number of research participants was limited to 20 students from a single educational institution. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings is contextual and cannot directly represent the broader population of early childhood education institutions. The specific social, cultural, and religious characteristics of TK Yustisia Kotabumi may possess unique features that influence the dynamics of moral development among children. Second, the relatively limited duration of the study (eight weeks) did not fully allow for the observation of longterm value internalization processes. Considering that moral development is a gradual and continuous developmental process, longitudinal observations would likely provide a more comprehensive understanding of the stability and persistence of children's moral dispositions over time.

Third, although this study employed methodological triangulation through observations, interviews, and document analysis, behavioral analysis remains potentially subject to interpretative bias. The assessment of indicators such as empathy or the spontaneity of moral behavior is inherently influenced by the researcher's subjective interpretation in understanding the context of children's social interactions. Fourth, the use of percentage calculations in this case study research design is descriptive in nature and not intended for statistical inference. Therefore, the numerical data presented serve to reinforce observable tendencies in the findings rather than to provide a basis for quantitative generalization.

Fifth, this study focuses primarily on the religious dimension within an Islamic-based educational context. As a result, it does not fully explain how similar mechanisms of moral formation might operate in non-religious or multicultural educational settings. Variations in institutional context may potentially produce different patterns in the development of children's moral character. Considering these limitations, future research is recommended to involve a broader sample, longer observation periods, and the application of mixed-methods approaches in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in moral development in early childhood education. Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations are proposed for the development of educational practice and future research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practical Recommendations

First, schools need to strengthen the consistency of teacher exemplarity as the primary strategy for moral development. Teacher professional development should not only focus on pedagogical competence but also emphasize the strengthening of personal competence, emotional regulation, and empathetic communication. Considering the high responsiveness of students to modeling, the quality of teacher child interaction becomes a key determinant of the effectiveness of character education. Second, religious habituation practices that have been implemented effectively should be enriched with reflective approaches appropriate to children's developmental stages. Teachers can integrate simple questions or brief dialogues to help children understand the meaning behind routine practices. In this way, the process does not merely promote procedural compliance but gradually supports the internalization of moral values.

Third, the management of the hidden curriculum should be conducted consciously and systematically. Schools are encouraged to conduct periodic institutional culture audits to ensure that interaction patterns, classroom environments, visual symbols, and unwritten policies are aligned with the moral values intended to be cultivated. Fourth, the evaluation of character education in early childhood education should not rely solely on administrative indicators but should also include observations of children's

spontaneous behavior in natural situations. Contextual and authentic assessment instruments will provide a more accurate representation of the depth of value internalization.

Academic Recommendations

First, future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs in order to examine the stability of moral internalization over a longer period of time. Second, comparative studies across institutions with different characteristics such as religious and non-religious schools are needed to examine the consistency of these findings across diverse educational contexts. Third, the use of mixed-methods approaches may enrich the analysis by integrating in depth qualitative data with more systematic quantitative measurements. Fourth, future studies may explore parental involvement as an external variable that potentially strengthens or weakens the process of value internalization within school environments. Overall, these recommendations emphasize that moral development in early childhood requires a sustained, collaborative approach grounded in a consistent institutional culture, both in educational practice and in future research development.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to analyze the moral development of early childhood students at TK Yustisia Kotabumi through four main dimensions: teacher exemplarity, religious habituation, the process of value internalization, and the hidden curriculum. The findings indicate that teacher exemplarity demonstrated the highest level of influence (87.5%), followed by religious habituation (83.3%), internalization (78.3%), and hidden curriculum (67.5%). These results suggest that explicit and structured practices tend to produce more immediate behavioral consistency, whereas the formation of implicit and spontaneous values requires a longer process and continuous reinforcement.

The findings further demonstrate that moral development in early childhood occurs gradually. The process begins with imitation of teachers as significant role models, continues through habituation in consistent daily routines, and eventually progresses toward the internalization of values as more stable moral dispositions. Although routine religious practices have proven effective in fostering behavioral regularity, the variation in the percentage of spontaneous behavioral indicators suggests that the transformation from external practices to internalized character is still in the developmental stage.

The study also highlights that moral education is not limited to the implementation of formal curricula. Rather, it is strongly influenced by the quality of daily interactions, teachers' emotional regulation, and the broader culture of the school environment. In this context, the hidden curriculum plays a significant role as a medium that reinforces and sustains moral values that are not always explicitly stated in formal curriculum documents.

Overall, moral development in early childhood requires an integrative and sustainable approach that combines consistent teacher exemplarity, structured habituation, and conscious management of school culture. The success of moral education is therefore determined not only by instructional strategies but also by the coherence and authenticity of the overall educational environment.

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