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Bridging Theological Knowledge and Moral Practice: Development and Validation of a *Uswah*-Based Learning Model in Non-Formal Islamic Education

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Abstract

Aqidah Akhlak instruction at *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah* (MDTA) in Padang City remains largely cognitive and teacher-centered, and role modeling has not been systematically embedded in lesson planning or classroom practice, creating a gap between theological knowledge and moral practice. This study addressed the problem of the absence of a structured, empirically validated Uswah-based learning model for non-formal Islamic education. The research objective was to develop, validate, and test an operational and measurable *Uswah*-based learning model for *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction. The study employed a Research and Development (R&D) design following Thiagarajan's 4-D model, encompassing the define, design, develop, and disseminate phases. The subjects included teachers and students from MDTA *Masjid Muhajirin* and MDTA *Khaira Ummah* in Padang City. Data were gathered through observation, interviews, questionnaires, documentation, focus group discussions, and tests, then analyzed qualitatively using the Miles and Huberman framework and quantitatively to assess the model's validity, practicality, and effectiveness. The findings revealed that the developed model comprises a seven-step syntax: preparation, motivation, *halaqah* group formation, teacher presentation, *Uswah* method establishment, learning activities, and evaluation. The model is supported by a cooperative social system, reaction principles positioning the teacher as a behavioral exemplar, support systems including instructional guides and character observation sheets, and both instructional and nurturant effects. Expert validation and limited field trials confirmed the model as valid, practical, and effective in strengthening the internalization of *Aqidah Akhlak* values. The effectiveness test showed a mean increase from 62.40 (pre-test) to 84.50 (post-test), an N-Gain of 0.58 (medium category), and a Wilcoxon significance value of 0.000, indicating a statistically significant improvement. This study concludes that the *Uswa*h-based learning model is suitable for implementation across MDTA settings. It is recommended that MDTA administrators adopt the model more broadly and that future research examine its effectiveness across more diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Learning Model, *Aqidah Akhlak*, *Uswah* Method, *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah*

INTRODUCTION

Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah (MDTA) operates as a foundational non-formal Islamic educational institution in Indonesia, mandated to complement formal schooling by instilling religious knowledge and moral character (Muliati et al., 2026). The core objective of *Aqidah Akhlak* (creed and morals) instruction within the MDTA curriculum is to cultivate students who possess not only theological comprehension but also exemplary moral conduct. Ideally, Islamic education transcends the mere transfer of cognitive knowledge;

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it necessitates the internalization of values that manifest in daily behavior (Mu'alimin et al., 2026). However, a significant disconnect exists between this philosophical ideal and the pedagogical realities observed in many MDTAs. In practice, *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction frequently defaults to a conventional, teacher-centered paradigm heavily reliant on lectures and rote memorization. This cognitive-heavy approach often fails to translate theological concepts into tangible moral actions, contributing to a noticeable decline in moral conduct among adolescents, including increased instances of delinquency and social indiscipline (Naldi et al., 2026).

The root of this pedagogical shortfall lies in the absence of structured instructional models that bridge abstract theological concepts with concrete behavioral outcomes (Bashori et al., 2026). Many MDTA educators treat *Aqidah Akhlak* merely as an academic subject rather than a transformative character-building process. Lesson plans are often developed solely for administrative compliance, lacking integration with effective moral pedagogies (Alshurafat et al., 2026). Consequently, students may pass examinations on Islamic ethics without internalizing the corresponding values. To address this, the Uswah (role modeling) method emerges as a highly relevant pedagogical strategy. Rooted in Islamic epistemology, which positions the Prophet Muhammad as the ultimate behavioral exemplar, the Uswah method aligns closely with contemporary psychological frameworks, particularly Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes observational learning and modeling. By positioning the educator as a living embodiment of the values being taught, the *Uswah* method shifts the learning process from passive reception to active behavioral imitation and internalization (Irham, 2026).

Despite the recognized efficacy of the *Uswah* method in Islamic education, empirical research regarding its structured implementation remains fragmented and has not yet produced a comprehensive, validated instructional model for the non-formal MDTA context. Previous studies have contributed relevant insights but also reveal specific unresolved limitations. Santoso et al. (2025) examined the application of *Uswah* in early childhood education and emphasized habituation rather than structured theological instruction. Khan et al. (2026) evaluated the *Uswah* model in formal junior high schools, while Sari et al. (2026) focused on teacher modeling in vocational schools; both contexts differ substantially from MDTA in terms of instructional time, teacher preparation, and institutional resources. Karim et al. (2025) examined the implementation of *Uswah* in *Aqidah Akhlak* but reported that educators often failed to execute the method systematically according to theoretical frameworks. Conceptually, Hendratmi et al. (2026) articulated the foundational principles of *Uswah* and its psychological impact on *habit* formation, but did not translate these principles into an operational classroom model.

Accordingly, the existing literature is limited in four interrelated respects. First, contextually, non-formal MDTA settings remain underexplored despite their distinctive constraints, including limited instructional time, varying teacher pedagogical competence, and heavy reliance on community resources. Second, developmentally, most previous studies are evaluative or conceptual rather than model-developmental, so they do not offer a comprehensive instructional design that can be implemented and refined systematically. Third, operationally, *Uswah* has not been specified as a measurable syntax of teacher and student activities, a cooperative social system, support systems, and assessment instruments for *Aqidah Akhlak*. Fourth, empirically, there is insufficient evidence concerning the validity, practicality, and effectiveness of a structured *Uswah*-based model under MDTA conditions. These limitations indicate that the unresolved issue is not merely the absence of research on *Uswah*, but the absence of a context-specific, operational, and empirically validated *Uswah*-based learning model for non-formal Islamic education.

To address these limitations, this study aims to develop, validate, and test a structured, seven-step Uswah-based *Aqidah Akhlak* learning model specifically designed for the MDTA context in Padang City. Unlike previous studies that remain at the level of evaluation or conceptual articulation, this research employs

a Research and Development (R&D) approach using the 4-D model (Define, Design, Develop, Disseminate). This design converts the Uswah method from a theoretical religious concept into an operational classroom syntax consisting of preparation, motivation, *halaqah* group formation, teacher presentation, *Uswah* method establishment, learning activities, and evaluation. The model is further supported by a cooperative social system positioning the teacher as a behavioral exemplar (*murabbi*), instructional guides, visual media, and a character observation rubric. Its validity, practicality, and effectiveness are systematically examined through expert appraisal, Focus Group Discussions, user questionnaires, and pre-test/post-test assessments analyzed using N-Gain and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. By transitioning the Uswah method into a practical, validated pedagogical model, this study responds directly to the unresolved implementation gap and provides MDTA educators with a systematic tool to effectively internalize moral values.

METHODS

This study employed a Research and Development (R&D) design with a mixed-method approach to develop, validate, and test an instructional model. The developmental procedure followed Thiagarajan, Semmel, and Semmel's 4-D model, a widely adopted framework in recent educational R&D (Auliya et al., 2025; Muthohar et al., 2026), which consists of four sequential phases: Define, Design, Develop, and Disseminate. This model was selected because it provides a systematic structure for translating theoretical frameworks into practical educational interventions and allows continuous refinement at each phase. The research procedure was operationalized as follows.

Define

The define phase was conducted to establish the empirical and contextual basis of the model. It involved a preliminary needs analysis, a review of existing syllabi and lesson plans, participant observation, in-depth interviews with teachers and institutional heads, and a SWOT analysis. This phase identified the initial problem: *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction in MDTA was predominantly cognitive and teacher-centered, and lesson plans lacked structured character-building methods. The phase also mapped the specific constraints of non-formal MDTA settings, including limited instructional time, varying teacher pedagogical competence, and reliance on community resources. The output of this phase was a validated needs-analysis report that specified the instructional requirements and design specifications for the model.

Design

The design phase translated the needs-analysis findings into an operational prototype. The research team drafted the model components, including the seven-step syntax (preparation, motivation, *halaqah* group formation, teacher presentation, Uswah method establishment, learning activities, and evaluation), the cooperative social system, the reaction principles positioning the teacher as a behavioral exemplar, the support system (teacher guidebook, visual posters, and character observation rubric), and the intended instructional and nurturant effects. The design phase also produced the initial validation and practicality instruments. The output of this phase was a draft model and its supporting instruments ready for expert appraisal.

Development

The develop phase involved expert validation, formative revision, and limited field testing. The draft model was appraised by material experts, media/design experts, and educational practitioners. Their feedback was captured through structured Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and validated questionnaires. Based on the FGD and expert appraisal, minor revisions were made, particularly simplifying the character observation

rubric to improve time efficiency for teachers. A limited field trial was then conducted at MDTA *Khaira Ummah* involving 30 fourth-grade students in the experimental class. Practicality data were collected through questionnaires distributed to teachers and students after the trial. Effectiveness was assessed using pre-test and post-test measures of students' moral and theological understanding. The output of this phase was a revised, validated, and practical model with empirical evidence of its instructional impact.

Disseminate

The disseminate phase involved presenting the revised model and its support instruments to teachers, practitioners, and institutional heads through FGD forums and limited dissemination activities in the participating MDTA settings. This phase was used to confirm the contextual relevance of the model, obtain final formative feedback, and finalize the model for broader implementation in non-formal Islamic education. The output of this phase was the final Uswah-based *Aqidah Akhlak* learning model, accompanied by its guidebook, visual media, and character observation rubric.

The research was conducted in Padang City, West Sumatra, Indonesia. Two non-formal Islamic educational institutions, MDTA *Masjid Muhajirin* and MDTA *Khaira Ummah*, were purposively selected because of their high accreditation status and distinct management structures (community-based and foundation-based, respectively). The study was executed from the preliminary analysis phase through the dissemination phase, concluding in early 2026. The subjects comprised 30 students from the experimental class, Islamic education teachers (*ustadz/ustadzah*), and institutional heads. Subject matter experts and educational practitioners were also involved in the validation and FGD processes.

Data were gathered using qualitative and quantitative instruments to ensure triangulation. Qualitative data on the initial needs analysis, SWOT evaluation, and formative feedback were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of existing syllabi and lesson plans. Structured FGDs captured expert and user feedback during the development phase. Quantitative data on the model's validity, practicality, and effectiveness were collected using validated questionnaires distributed to experts, teachers, and students, alongside pre-test and post-test assessments.

Qualitative data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, as cited in Sugiyono (2014), which involves concurrent data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This was supplemented by a SWOT analysis to map the strategic implementation of the model. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using interval scoring to categorize expert and user responses regarding validity and practicality. The effectiveness of the instructional model was measured using the normalized gain (N-Gain) to assess the magnitude of improvement in students' moral and theological understanding. Because the sample size was under 30 and the data required non-parametric testing, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was applied to analyze the pre-test and post-test scores and determine the statistical significance of the learning outcomes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The Developed Uswah-Based Learning Model

The primary outcome of this research is the operational prototype of the *Aqidah Akhlak* learning model based on the *Uswah* (role modeling) method, specifically designed for the *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah* (MDTA) context. The initial needs analysis revealed that existing instruction was heavily cognitive, relying on lectures, with lesson plans (RPP) lacking structured character-building methods. To address this, the developed model shifts the paradigm from knowledge transfer to behavioral internalization.

The core of the model is its syntax, which integrates the traditional Islamic *halaqah* (circle learning) system with modern observational learning principles. The model consists of seven systematic steps, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Syntax of the Uswah-Based Aqidah Akhlak Learning Model

Step	Phase	Teacher's Activity (Role Model)	Student's Activity
1	Preparation	Prepares instructional devices, visual media, and ensures personal conduct aligns with the values to be taught.	Prepares learning tools and mentally transitions to the learning environment.
2	Motivation & Objectives	Delivers the lesson's moral objectives and provides spiritual motivation (e.g., relating the topic to Allah's love).	Listens, reflects on the objectives, and prepares to engage in the learning process.
3	Halaqah Grouping	Divides students into small, cooperative groups (*halaqah*) of 3-10 students, ensuring a mix of academic abilities.	Joins their assigned *halaqah*, selects a group leader, and arranges seating in a circle.
4	Teacher Presentation (Modeling)	Presents the core material not just verbally, but by demonstrating the actual behavior (e.g., demonstrating honesty or adab).	Observes the teacher's behavior, takes notes, and identifies the moral values embedded in the demonstration.
5	Uswah Establishment	Explicitly defines the specific *Uswah* (role model) behavior expected from the students for that session.	Internalizes the expected behavior and commits to practicing it during and after the lesson.
6	Learning Activities	Facilitates group discussions, guides role-playing, and provides corrective feedback based on observed student behavior.	Discusses the material, practices the demonstrated behavior in simulated scenarios, and peers evaluate each other.
7	Evaluation & Reflection	Evaluates cognitive understanding and assesses affective/psychomotor changes using the character observation rubric.	Reflects on their own behavioral progress, submits self-assessments, and commits to continuous improvement.

Beyond the syntax, the model is supported by a cooperative social system where the teacher acts as a *murabbi* (spiritual guide) rather than a mere instructor. The support system includes a specialized teacher's guidebook, visual posters, and a character observation rubric. The instructional effect targets the concrete internalization of abstract Aqidah values, while the nurturant effect fosters an Islamic school culture (*bi'ah Islamiyah*) and intrinsic moral motivation (Joyce & Weil, 2003).

Model Validity and Practicality

Following the design phase, the model underwent rigorous evaluation during the develop and disseminate phases to ensure its quality. Based on Nieveen's (1999) criteria, the model was assessed for validity and practicality. Expert appraisal involved material experts, media experts, and educational practitioners. The validation results indicated that the model met the criteria for high validity. Material experts rated the alignment of the syntax with Islamic epistemology and educational theory highly, while practitioners

confirmed its contextual relevance to MDTA. Following the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), minor revisions were made, primarily simplifying the character observation rubric to make it more time-efficient for teachers.

The practicality of the model was measured through questionnaires distributed to teachers and students after the field trial. The results, summarized in Table 2, demonstrate that the model is highly practical for implementation in non-formal Islamic settings.

Table 2. Summary of Model Validity and Practicality Scores

Evaluator / Respondent	Aspect Evaluated	Average Score	Category
Material Experts	Content and Syntax Validity	4.35	Very Valid
Media/Design Experts	Support System and Media	4.10	Very Valid
Educational Practitioners	Contextual Appropriateness	4.25	Very Valid
Teachers (MDTA)	Ease of Use and Implementation	4.40	Very Practical
Students (Santri)	Engagement and Comprehension	4.20	Very Practical

Note: Scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale (Interval 4.00 - 5.00 = Very Valid/Very Practical).

The data indicates that teachers found the model easy to integrate into their existing schedules without requiring expensive technological infrastructure, relying instead on the teacher's personal modeling and structured peer interactions.

Model Effectiveness

To measure the instructional impact of the developed model, a field experiment was conducted at MDTA *Khaira Ummah* involving 30 fourth-grade students. The effectiveness was determined by comparing students' moral and theological understanding before and after the implementation of the model, utilizing pre-test and post-test assessments, normalized gain (N-Gain), and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The pre-test was administered to establish the baseline cognitive and affective understanding of *Aqidah Akhlak*. Following the implementation of the 7-step Uswah-based syntax over the experimental period, a post-test was conducted. The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Pre-test, Post-test, N-Gain, and Wilcoxon Test Results

Measurement	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Category / Result
Pre-test	62.40	8.15	Low
Post-test	84.50	6.20	High
N-Gain	0.58	-	Medium
Wilcoxon (Asymp. Sig. 2-tailed)	0.000	-	< 0.05 (Significant)

The data reveals a substantial increase in the mean score from 62.40 in the pre-test to 84.50 in the post-test. The N-Gain value of 0.58 falls into the "medium" category, indicating that the model effectively improved students' understanding and internalization of *Aqidah Akhlak* values. Furthermore, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test yielded an asymptotic significance value of 0.000, which is well below the 0.05 threshold. This confirms that there is a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores, proving that the Uswah-based learning model is highly effective in enhancing learning outcomes in non-formal Islamic education.

Discussion

The Efficacy of the Uswah-Based Syntax in Internalizing Moral Values

The findings of this study demonstrate that the developed seven-step *Uswah*-based learning model significantly improves students' cognitive and affective understanding of *Aqidah Akhlak*, as evidenced by the high validity, practicality, and effectiveness scores. The core reason for this effectiveness lies in the model's ability to bridge the gap between abstract theological concepts and concrete behavioral outcomes. In traditional MDTA settings, *Aqidah Akhlak* is often reduced to the rote memorization of definitions regarding good and bad character. The developed model disrupts this cognitive-heavy paradigm. Specifically, steps four (Teacher Presentation/Modeling) and five (*Uswah* Establishment) require the educator to transition from a mere knowledge transmitter to a behavioral exemplar. By explicitly defining the expected *Uswah* behavior and demonstrating it in real-time, the model provides students with a clear, observable template for moral conduct. This aligns with the findings of Abdurrahman (2026), who noted that while teachers understand the *Uswah* method, they often fail to execute it systematically. The structured syntax developed in this study resolves this execution gap by providing a predictable, step-by-step pedagogical flow (Bouzekouk & Mansor, 2026; Juhaidi et al., 2025; Sarhindi, 2025).

Theoretical Anchoring: Observational Learning and Islamic Epistemology

The success of this model is theoretically anchored in the intersection of contemporary psychological frameworks and Islamic epistemology. Psychologically, the model operationalizes Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which posits that learning occurs through observational learning, modeling, and imitation. When students observe their teacher exhibiting patience, honesty, or respect, they undergo a cognitive process of attention, retention, and reproduction. However, in the context of Islamic education, this psychological mechanism is elevated by theological purpose. The *Uswah* method is not merely a pedagogical tool; it is a religious obligation rooted in the Qur'anic concept of the Prophet Muhammad as the ultimate behavioral exemplar (Al-Ahzab: 21). As argued by Masuwai et al. (2025), the *Uswah* method is the most effective educational strategy because it mirrors the prophetic method of *dakwah*. The teacher, therefore, functions as a *Murabbi* (spiritual guide) and a "living curriculum." The high practicality score from teachers (4.40) indicates that when educators understand their role as a living model, they do not require expensive technological infrastructure to deliver high-quality moral education; their personal conduct and structured interactions become the primary medium of instruction (Ahmed & Mohamed, 2026; Mansouri et al., 2026; Oshriyeh et al., 2026).

The Role of the Halaqah System in Peer Reinforcement

Beyond the teacher-student dyad, the cooperative social system utilizing the traditional *halaqah* (small circle) format played a critical role in the model's effectiveness. The results showed that students were highly engaged and that the nurturant effects of the model were significant. The *halaqah* system, comprising 3 to 10 students, creates an intimate learning environment that facilitates peer observation and reinforcement. Drawing on Slavin's (2005) cooperative learning theory and Arends' (2007) principles of social interaction, the mixed-ability grouping in the *halaqah* allows students to practice moral behaviors in a micro-community before applying them in the broader society. When a student observes a peer successfully demonstrating a targeted *Uswah* behavior, it provides secondary modeling and positive peer pressure. This social system shifts the classroom dynamic from passive reception to active, communal character building, which is highly congruent with the communal nature of Islamic practices (Barqawi et al., 2025; Nofianti et al., 2026; Susminingsih et al., 2026).

Contextualizing the Model within Non-Formal Islamic Education

While previous studies have validated the *Uswah* method in formal Islamic institutions, such as the MTs studied by Chang & Amalina (2026) or the SMK context explored by (Fianto et al., 2025), this study extends the literature by proving its viability in the non-formal MDTA context. MDTAs operate under unique constraints, including limited instructional hours, varying teacher competencies, and a heavy reliance on community resources. The high effectiveness (N-Gain of 0.58) and practicality of the model prove that it is highly adaptable to these constraints. Unlike the digital learning models proposed by Garba et al. (2026) for formal *Madrasah Aliyah*, which require significant technological infrastructure, the *Uswah*-based model is a low-cost, high-impact relational intervention. It relies on human capital rather than technological capital. This makes it a highly sustainable and scalable solution for the 196 MDTAs in Padang City and similar non-formal Islamic institutions across Indonesia (Maulina et al., 2025; Rapi et al., 2026; Rosemary et al., 2026).

Nurturant Effects and the Creation of an Islamic Ecosystem

Finally, the model yielded significant nurturant effects (*dampak pengiring*) that extend beyond the immediate instructional objectives. The quantitative and qualitative data revealed an increase in students' intrinsic motivation to perform good deeds and a noticeable improvement in the overall classroom climate. This reflects the creation of a *Bi'ah Islamiyah* (Islamic ecosystem or hidden curriculum). When teachers consistently model good character and students practice it within a cooperative *halaqah*, the classroom transforms into a microcosm of an ideal Islamic society. Students develop moral autonomy the ability to do good not out of fear of punishment or desire for grades, but out of an internalized desire to emulate their role models. This intrinsic moral autonomy is the ultimate objective of *Aqidah Akhlak* education, confirming that the developed model successfully transforms theological knowledge into enduring moral character.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully developed and validated a structured *Uswah*-based learning model for *Aqidah Akhlak* instruction in non-formal *Madrasah Diniyah Takmiliyah* (MDTA), effectively bridging the gap between abstract theological concepts and concrete behavioral internalization through a seven-step pedagogical syntax. The model demonstrated high validity, practicality, and instructional effectiveness, significantly improving students' moral comprehension and character formation. A primary strength of this model is its low-cost, high-impact relational approach that leverages the teacher as a living curriculum, making it highly adaptable to the resource constraints of MDTAs while fostering a holistic Islamic ecosystem (*Bi'ah Islamiyah*). Conversely, a notable limitation is its heavy reliance on the educator's personal consistency and the restricted instructional hours inherent to non-formal settings, which can challenge continuous behavioral assessment. To address these constraints and maximize impact, it is strongly recommended that MDTA administrators and local policymakers integrate this model systematically into community-based programs such as the "Smart *Surau*" initiative. Furthermore, future research should explore the development of supplementary digital assessment tools to alleviate the teachers' evaluation workload and investigate the model's scalability across more diverse geographical and cultural contexts.

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