



# Pedagogical Strategies for Character Building in Islamic Education: Addressing Moral Degradation in Secondary Schools

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the pedagogical strategies employed by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers to build noble character (akhlakul karimah) among students at SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo, North Lampung, in response to the growing phenomenon of moral degradation among adolescents. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological design, data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with the principal and PAI teachers, and documentation study. The findings reveal an integrated implementation of five core instructional strategies: (1) direct instruction through interactive lectures and role modeling; (2) indirect instruction via religious culture habituation; (3) interactive instruction through reflective group discussions; (4) independent study using daily moral journals; and (5) experiential learning through social activities and student organizations. These strategies effectively fostered discipline, honesty, and responsibility, supported by a strong school culture, although social media remained a primary inhibiting factor. The study concludes that the synergy of these five pedagogical approaches provides a holistic framework for internalizing moral values, transforming them from abstract concepts into daily behavioral habits. These results imply that character building in secondary schools requires a collaborative ecosystem between structured teaching, personal reflection, and real-world practice to effectively address modern moral challenges.

**Keywords:** Religious Character, Self-Discipline, Academic Excellence, Islamic Primary Education, Student Development.

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis strategi pedagogis yang digunakan oleh guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dalam membangun karakter mulia (akhlakul karimah) di kalangan siswa SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo, Lampung Utara, sebagai respons terhadap fenomena kemerosotan moral yang semakin meningkat di kalangan remaja. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologis, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam dengan kepala sekolah dan guru PAI, serta studi dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan implementasi terintegrasi dari lima strategi pengajaran inti: (1) pengajaran langsung melalui ceramah interaktif dan teladan; (2) pengajaran tidak langsung melalui pembiasaan budaya agama; (3) pengajaran interaktif melalui diskusi kelompok reflektif; (4) belajar mandiri menggunakan jurnal moral harian; dan (5) pembelajaran pengalaman melalui kegiatan sosial dan organisasi siswa. Strategi-strategi ini secara efektif menumbuhkan disiplin, kejujuran, dan tanggung jawab, yang didukung oleh budaya sekolah yang kuat, meskipun media sosial tetap menjadi faktor penghambat utama. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa sinergi dari lima pendekatan pedagogis ini memberikan kerangka kerja holistik untuk menginternalisasi nilai-nilai moral, mengubahnya dari konsep abstrak menjadi kebiasaan perilaku sehari-hari. Hasil ini menyiratkan bahwa pembentukan karakter di sekolah menengah membutuhkan ekosistem kolaboratif antara pengajaran terstruktur, refleksi pribadi, dan praktik dunia nyata untuk secara efektif mengatasi tantangan moral modern.*

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**Kata Kunci:** Strategi Pedagogis, Pembentukan Karakter, Pendidikan Islam, Degradasi Moral, Sekolah Menengah.

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global landscape, preserving ethical integrity among the younger generation has become a critical imperative as traditional moral structures face unprecedented pressure from rapid socio-technological shifts. The digitalization of human interaction and the erosion of localized cultural values have placed character education at the center of international academic discourse, particularly regarding its efficacy in developing resilient personality traits in diverse educational settings (Gooch, 2026; Zheng et al., 2026). In Islamic contexts, character building—specifically the cultivation of *akhlakul karimah*—is not merely a pedagogical goal but a foundational religious obligation intended to produce individuals who harmonize intellectual prowess with spiritual maturity. However, the significance of these strategies often clashes with the complexities of modern secularism and the fluidity of ethical standards in the 21st century (Syukri et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2025). Consequently, educational institutions, especially secondary schools, are increasingly viewed as the primary frontline of moral defense, necessitating a robust and adaptable pedagogical framework that bridges the gap between ancient theological principles and contemporary social realities across the globalized world.

The primary problem addressed in this study is the escalating phenomenon of moral degradation within secondary schools, manifested through various social pathologies and a diminishing sense of ethical responsibility among adolescents. In many Islamic educational environments, teachers face the daunting challenge of countering negative external influences, such as unfiltered consumption of digital content and weakening parental supervision, which often undermine classroom moral instruction (Musadat & Khorimah, 2024; Pasariabu et al., 2023). This challenge is exacerbated by the disconnect between theoretical religious knowledge and practical behavioral application, where students may achieve high academic scores in religious subjects but fail to internalize those values in their social interactions. Furthermore, the lack of innovative instructional methodologies often results in character education being perceived as a redundant or purely dogmatic exercise rather than a transformative life skill (Nurjanah, 2020; Ramayulis, 2022). These internal and external pressures create a high-stakes environment in which traditional character-building efforts are often rendered ineffective, leaving a critical void in students' moral development during their most formative years.

Previous scholarship has extensively explored various facets of character building and Islamic education, yet these studies often remain compartmentalized. Research on teacher strategies for instilling *akhlakul karimah* has been conducted by Musadat and Khorimah (2024), Pasariabu et al. (2023), and Sahlan (2020), who focused primarily on the ethnographic and interactional roles of teachers in fostering religious culture. Studies on the integration of digital ethics and pedagogical innovation include Nurjanah (2020) and Gooch (2026), while the philosophical and theoretical foundations of moral education have been articulated by Ramayulis (2022) and Syukri et al. (2025). Additionally, the role of school environment in character habituation was analyzed by Sahlan (2020) and Zainuddin (2020). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often suffer from a narrow focus; for instance, Musadat and Khorimah (2024) rely heavily on ethnographic descriptions without offering a scalable pedagogical model, and Pasariabu et al. (2023) emphasize teacher interaction but neglect the influence of digital ecosystems. Furthermore, many of these works fail to critically address the specific dynamics of rural or semi-urban schools like SMA Riyadlul Ulum, where the conflict between traditional values and modern moral degradation is particularly acute.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive synthesis of five distinct pedagogical dimensions—direct, indirect, interactive, independent, and experiential instruction—into a single integrated framework for character building in an Islamic secondary school context. Unlike prior studies that often isolate a single method, such as habituation or direct lecturing, this study demonstrates how these

disparate strategies function as a synergistic ecosystem to combat specific forms of moral decay (Sanjaya, 2016; Saskatchewan Education, 1991). This research introduces a more nuanced understanding of how "moral journals" and "religious culture habituation" serve as modern tools for traditional *akhlak* internalisation, providing a practical blueprint that has been under-documented in current literature. By focusing on SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo, this study offers a localized yet highly relevant perspective on how rural educational institutions can adapt sophisticated instructional frameworks to address contemporary adolescent crises, thereby contributing a new dimension to the global discourse on character-building methodologies within religious education.

A significant research gap exists between the theoretical aspirations of Islamic character education and its empirical reality in the face of modern moral degradation. While existing literature such as Wijaya et al. (2025) and Syukri et al. (2025) discusses the philosophical relevance of Islamic thought, there is a lack of empirical data connecting these high-level philosophies to specific, day-to-day pedagogical actions in secondary classrooms. Furthermore, many previous studies, including those by Nurjanah (2020) and Ramayulis (2022), do not sufficiently address "inhibiting factors," such as social media influence, with the same depth as the instructional strategies themselves. This study fills that gap by not only documenting the "what" and "how" of teaching character but also identifying the specific systemic barriers that hinder these efforts. Unlike the work of Pasariabu et al. (2023), which remains focused on teacher-student interaction, this research expands the scope to include the organizational and experiential dimensions of character building, providing a more holistic analysis of the educational environment as a moral laboratory.

This study is grounded in a robust theoretical framework that combines Islamic educational philosophy with modern pedagogical theories, specifically the instructional approach framework proposed by Saskatchewan Education (1991) and the standardized process models of Sanjaya (2016). This "Grand Theory" integrates the traditional concept of *akhlakul karimah* internalisation—which emphasizes role modeling (*uswah*) and habituation (*riyadhah*)—with contemporary instructional categories including direct, indirect, interactive, independent, and experiential learning. By utilizing this dual-lens framework, the research analyzes how spiritual values are transmitted through modern educational methodologies, ensuring that character building is not merely a transfer of knowledge but a systematic molding of behavior (Ramayulis, 2022; Sahlan, 2020). This theoretical synthesis allows for a deeper exploration of pedagogical strategies as both a religious mission and a professional educational process, bridging the gap between sacred objectives and secular pedagogical standards.

The central concept of this research is "Pedagogical Strategies for Character Building," which views character education as an active, multidimensional process rather than a passive reception of information. This concept operationalizes *akhlakul karimah* through specific behavioral markers such as discipline, honesty, and social responsibility, which are then mapped against the five pedagogical domains (Sanjaya, 2016; Saskatchewan Education, 1991). Furthermore, the study uses the concept of "Moral Degradation" as a critical backdrop, defining it as the erosion of ethical standards under external socio-cultural pressures. By framing these strategies as a direct intervention against moral decay, the study emphasizes the concept of "Integrated Character Internalization," in which the school environment, the teacher's persona, and the curriculum converge to form a unified moral influence on the student (Sahlan, 2020; Zainuddin, 2020). This conceptual approach ensures that the research remains focused on the functional relationship between teaching methods and student character outcomes.

What makes this research particularly compelling is its focus on a specific, high-intensity moral environment—SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo—where PAI teachers have developed a unique "Five-Pillar" pedagogical response to combat contemporary adolescent issues. The school's ability to maintain a

strong religious culture despite the encroaching influence of social media provides a fascinating case study in institutional resilience and pedagogical creativity (Musadat & Khorimah, 2024; Pasariabu et al., 2023). Furthermore, integrating "daily moral journals" as an independent study tool represents a significant departure from standard lecturing methods, offering a rare glimpse into how self-reflection can be institutionalized in a secondary school setting. This research is important because it provides evidence-based strategies that are both culturally grounded and pedagogically modern, offering hope and practical guidance to other institutions struggling with similar crises of character among their youth (Nurjanah, 2020; Sahlan, 2020).

The ultimate objective of this research is to comprehensively analyze and evaluate the pedagogical strategies implemented by PAI teachers at SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo in their effort to build noble character and mitigate moral degradation. Specifically, this study aims to describe the implementation of the five instructional pillars—direct, indirect, interactive, independent, and experiential instruction—and to identify the supporting and inhibiting factors that influence their effectiveness in the modern classroom (Sanjaya, 2016; Saskatchewan Education, 1991). By achieving these objectives, the study seeks to offer a validated model of character education that can be replicated or adapted by other Islamic educational institutions facing similar challenges. Ultimately, this research aims to strengthen Islamic education's role in producing a generation that is not only academically competent but also morally upright and socially responsible in an increasingly complex global environment (Ramayulis, 2022; Zainuddin, 2020).

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

The methodological framework of this research is constructed to provide a systematic and rigorous path for exploring complex pedagogical phenomena within a specific educational ecosystem. To ensure the findings are both credible and replicable, this section details the operational steps of the study, ranging from initial design to the final verification of data integrity. This methodological journey is designed to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and the practical realities of Islamic character education in the modern era (Ramayulis, 2022; Sugiyono, 2017). The following structure provides a comprehensive overview of the technical procedures employed to answer the research questions regarding the effectiveness of character-building strategies.

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach with a phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences of educators in fostering moral values. This design is particularly appropriate for exploring "how" and "why" specific pedagogical strategies are implemented within the unique socio-cultural context of an Islamic secondary school (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Sugiyono, 2017). The choice of phenomenology allows the researchers to delve into the subjective meanings teachers attach to their instructional actions, moving beyond surface-level observations to understand the deeper essence of character internalization. By adopting this perspective, the research ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the actual practices of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers as they navigate the challenges of adolescent moral degradation (Musadat & Khorimah, 2024; Pasariabu et al., 2023). To visualize the overarching flow of this research, from conceptualization to reporting, the following diagram illustrates the interconnected stages of the study:

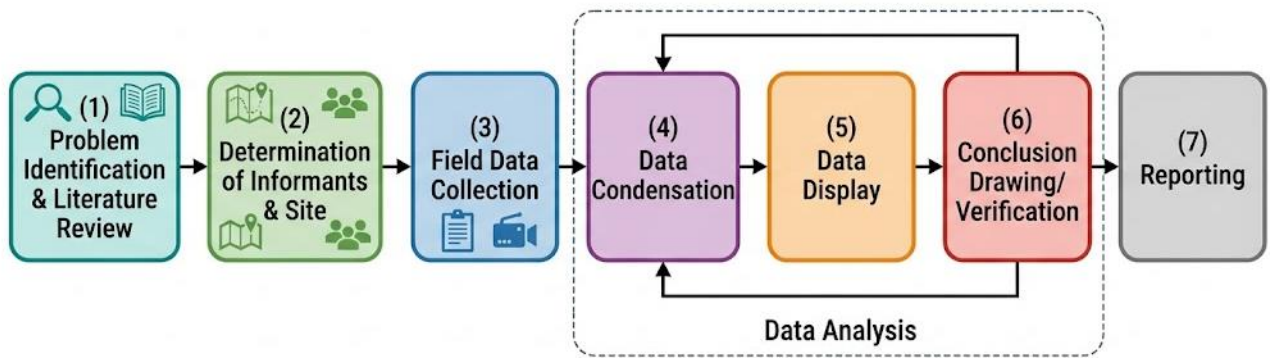


Figure 1. Research Flowchart and Methodological Roadmap

Figure 1 illustrates the iterative nature of the qualitative process, where data collection and analysis often occur simultaneously to refine the research focus. Each stage is characterized by a high degree of flexibility and reflexivity, allowing the researchers to adapt to new insights discovered in the field while maintaining methodological consistency.

## 2.2 Research Subjects and Location

The research was conducted at SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo, Abung Surakarta, North Lampung, a site selected for its robust implementation of religious culture amidst a changing social landscape. The subjects of this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they possessed the specialized knowledge required to address the research objectives (Miles et al., 2014; Sugiyono, 2017). The primary informants included the school principal as the institutional leader and three PAI teachers who are directly responsible for moral instruction. To provide a balanced perspective, secondary informants such as students and administrative staff were also involved to triangulate the findings. The details regarding the research location and participants are summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Research Subjects and Contextual Profiles

Category	Informant Code	Selection Criteria	Number
Institutional Lead	P-01	Oversight and policy of character building	1
Primary Educators	T-01, T-02, T-03	Certified PAI teachers with >5 years experience	3
Target Subjects	S-01 to S-05	Active students involved in moral programs	5
Document Source	DS-01	School moral journals and PAI lesson plans	-

Table 1 highlights the strategic distribution of informants across different levels of the school hierarchy, which is crucial for gaining a holistic understanding of how character-building policies are translated into classroom actions. This diverse pool of subjects ensures that the data reflects a multi-dimensional view of pedagogical effectiveness (Pasariabu et al., 2023; Sahlan, 2020).

## 2.3 Research Instruments and Research Questions

The primary instrument in this qualitative study is the researcher themselves, acting as the human instrument who collects and interprets data in the natural setting. To guide the inquiry and maintain focus, the study utilized a structured interview protocol and observation checklists derived from the specific research questions (Miles et al., 2014; Sanjaya, 2016). These instruments were designed to measure specific indicators of pedagogical success, such as student discipline and the internalization of *akhlakul karimah*. The relationship between the inquiry focus and the analytical approach is presented in the following table:

**Table 2. Research Questions and Types of Analysis**

Research Question	Indicator / Sub-Indicator	Types of Analysis
RQ1: What are the primary pedagogical strategies used?	Instruction types (Direct, Indirect, Interactive, etc.)	Phenomenological Analysis
RQ2: How is the strategy implementation process?	Teacher steps, role modeling, habituation	Narrative Process Analysis
RQ3: What factors inhibit and support the process?	Environmental, technological, and internal factors	Thematic/SWOT Analysis

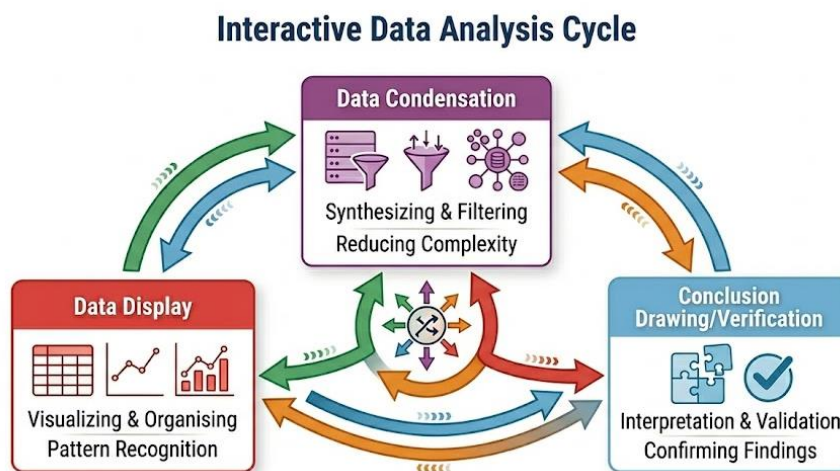
The alignment between research questions and analytical types shown in Table 2 ensures that every data point collected contributes directly to the scholarly objectives. After defining the instruments, the process moves toward the actual gathering of empirical evidence in the field.

### 2.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out through a multi-method approach comprising participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies to ensure depth and breadth. Observation focused on the "hidden curriculum" and religious habituation practices, while interviews were used to explore teacher motivations and pedagogical philosophies (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Sugiyono, 2017). Documentation involved reviewing student moral journals, lesson plans (RPP), and school records of behavioral incidents to cross-reference verbal accounts with written evidence. This "triangulation of methods" is essential for validating the complex social interactions involved in character education, especially when dealing with sensitive issues like moral degradation (Musadat & Khorimah, 2024; Pasariabu et al., 2023; Sahlan, 2020).

### 2.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Condensation involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying field notes to identify core themes, while display utilized matrices and narratives to present findings clearly (Miles et al., 2014; Sanjaya, 2016). This systematic reduction ensures that only the most relevant and high-impact pedagogical strategies are highlighted in the final report. The visual representation of this analytical cycle is provided below:



**Figure 2. Interactive Data Analysis Cycle**

Figure 2 demonstrates the fluidity of qualitative analysis, where the researcher moves back and forth between raw data and emerging conclusions to ensure accuracy. This process prevents premature conclusions and allows the findings to be deeply rooted in the actual evidence provided by the school community (Nurjanah, 2020; Zainuddin, 2020).

## 2.6 Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, the study applied four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement in the field and the use of both source and technique triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Sugiyono, 2017). Dependability was maintained through a rigorous audit trail of all research activities, while confirmability was ensured by maintaining objectivity during the interpretation process. These measures are vital for ensuring that the results accurately represent the pedagogical realities at SMA Riyadlul Ulum and can provide meaningful insights for other secondary schools (Pasariabu et al., 2023; Sahlan, 2020; Zainuddin, 2020).

## 3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The following section delineates the empirical findings regarding the pedagogical strategies implemented at SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo. This research identifies a holistic integration of five instructional frameworks designed to address moral degradation by transforming religious theory into lived practice.

### 3.1. Direct Instruction: Establishing the Cognitive-Normative Foundation

Direct instruction serves as the primary mechanism for establishing a baseline understanding of Islamic ethics. This strategy focuses on providing students with a clear cognitive map of *akhlakul karimah* (noble character) through systematic knowledge transfer.

**Table 1. Implementation of Direct Instruction Strategies**

Activity Form	Tactical Execution	Intended Behavioral Outcome
Explicit Teaching	Contextual explanation of the Qur'an and the Hadith.	Understanding morality as a divine command.
Uswah Hasanah	Teachers demonstrating polite speech and punctuality.	Modeling behavior for student imitation.
Direct Correction	Educative reprimands for behavioral violations.	Moral awareness and behavior improvement.
Authentic Assessment	Continuous monitoring of daily student behavior.	Transformation of traits into life habits.

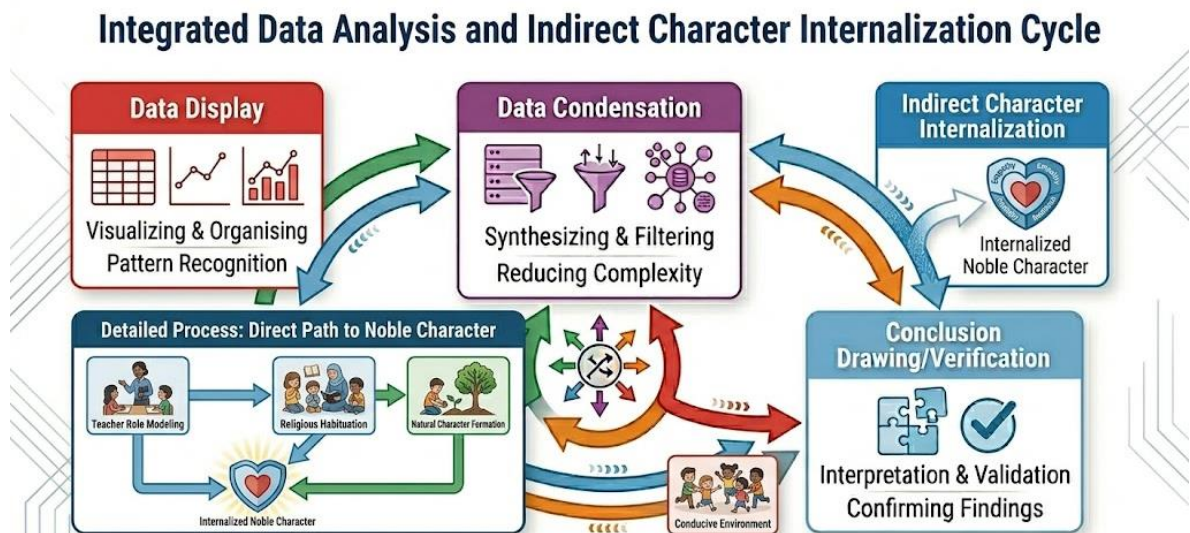
The interaction between normative explanation and teacher modeling creates a "Micro-Analysis" environment where students observe the immediate application of religious evidence (*dalil*) in their teachers' professional conduct. This alignment addresses the "error" often found in conventional education, where theory is detached from practice. The field research revealed that direct instruction is delivered through a "Cognitive-Reflective" model, in which teachers do not merely recite text but deconstruct moral dilemmas. During classroom observations, it was found that PAI teachers frequently utilized current social media trends as "negative cases" to be analyzed against Quranic principles. For instance, when discussing the concept of *Sidiq* (truthfulness), the teacher presented a viral case of digital fraud, prompting students to identify the specific moral deviations involved. This micro-analysis demonstrates that direct instruction at this institution is not a passive lecture but a targeted intervention

designed to sharpen students' normative judgment. The teachers act as "moral anchors," ensuring that abstract religious concepts are translated into concrete intellectual frameworks that students can use to evaluate their daily digital interactions.

Furthermore, interviews with the teaching staff highlighted the "Zero-Tolerance Modeling" policy. Findings show that the effectiveness of direct instruction depends heavily on the consistency of the teacher's behavior. Field data indicated that students are highly sensitive to "pedagogical hypocrisy"; thus, teachers at SMA Riyadlul Ulum strictly adhere to a professional code that includes arriving at the mosque before students and using formal, polite language even in informal settings. This alignment between verbal instruction and visible action creates a high-trust environment. When a teacher corrects a student's behavior, the correction is accepted not as an exercise of power, but as a legitimate guidance derived from a shared ethical standard. This synergy effectively reduces the gap between knowing the right thing and having the will to perform it.

### 3.2. Indirect Instruction: Character Internalization via School Culture

Unlike direct teaching, indirect strategies at SMA Riyadlul Ulum operate through the "hidden curriculum" of religious habituation and a conducive educational environment.



**Figure 4. Flow of Indirect Character Internalization**

Figure 1: The process of shaping character through non-instructional interactions and environmental stimuli. As shown in Figure 4, character formation is achieved when habitual activities—such as *Dhuha* prayers and the culture of greetings—move from external requirements to natural habits. This finding corroborates the theory that social interaction and emotional closeness between teachers and students are the keys to successful moral development.

Observations within the school grounds revealed that indirect instruction operates through a "Subliminal Habituation" mechanism. The school environment is saturated with religious symbols and ritualistic routines that bypass conscious resistance. For example, the "Morning Greeting Culture" (*Salaman*) at the school gate serves as a daily recalibration of the student's social attitude. Field notes describe how students who initially displayed signs of morning lethargy or irritability would undergo a visible shift in posture and facial expression upon being greeted warmly by the principal and teachers. This phenomenon suggests that the school culture acts as a "social thermostat," regulating the emotional

and moral temperature of the student body before they even enter the classroom. This consistent environmental stimulus transforms polite behavior from a conscious effort into a reflexive social response.

In-depth interviews further clarified that the "Religious Atmosphere" is intentionally engineered through collective rituals like the *Dhuha* prayer and communal zikir. The research found that these activities create a "Peer-Reinforced Sanction" system. When the majority of the student body naturally moves toward the mosque at the call to prayer, the minority who might otherwise be inclined to loiter feels a subtle yet powerful social pressure to conform. This is a critical finding: character building is not just a vertical relationship between teacher and student, but a horizontal one between peers. The indirect instruction strategy successfully creates a "moral majority" within the school, where being undisciplined or disrespectful becomes socially "expensive" for the individual student, thereby fostering a collective identity rooted in Islamic ethics.

### 3.3. Interactive Instruction: Fostering Social Awareness and Critical Ethics

Interactive strategies transition the student from a passive recipient to an active participant in moral problem-solving. Teachers utilize reflective dialogues to bridge the gap between religious ideals and the complex realities of adolescent life.

**Table 2. Interactive Learning Framework for Moral Problem Solving**

Interactive Method	Focus Area	Social Value Developed
Group Discussion	Analyzing honesty and peer ukhuwah.	Respect for differing opinions.
Reflective Q&A	Connecting values to personal experiences.	Critical moral reasoning.
Case Studies	Solving issues like cheating or peer conflict.	Social responsibility and empathy.

The data indicate that when students are presented with real-world dilemmas, such as digital ethics or school discipline, the "Interactive Instruction" strategy forces a synthesis between Islamic values and social practice. This deepens their social awareness beyond mere obedience. Field data from group discussion sessions showed that interactive instruction serves as a "Dialectical Laboratory" for adolescent ethics. In one session observed, students were tasked with debating the ethics of "Online Anonymity" and its impact on *Ghibah* (backbiting). The findings indicate that through these discussions, students move from a "Legalistic Morality" (doing things because they are told) to an "Empathic Morality" (doing things because they understand the impact on others). Students were seen challenging each other's perspectives, which forced them to articulate their moral reasoning. This micro-level interaction is essential for internalizing values, as it allows students to "own" the moral conclusion rather than have it imposed on them. The interactive strategy effectively bridges the gap between individual piety and social responsibility.

Moreover, the implementation of "Reflective Circles" in the boarding school (*pesantren*) wing of the institution revealed a deep level of emotional processing. Findings suggest that these sessions are used to resolve latent conflicts between roommates or classmates. Unlike formal disciplinary hearings, these circles prioritize "Restorative Justice," focusing on repairing the relationship and understanding the emotional roots of the moral lapse. Field evidence suggests that this interactive approach significantly reduces recidivism in behavioral issues. By analyzing the data from these sessions, it becomes clear that

interactive instruction functions as a psychological safety net, allowing students to navigate the complexities of teenage social life while remaining tethered to Islamic ethical anchors.

### 3.4. Independent Study: Developing Internal Moral Autonomy

To ensure that noble character persists outside school supervision, PAI teachers implement independent-study strategies focused on self-reflection (*muhasabah*).

**Table 3. Self-Reflection Matrix (Daily Moral Journal)**

Day	Positive Behavior	Behavior Requiring Improvement	Planned Improvement Strategy
Monday	Assisted a peer in need.	Tardiness to school.	Depart earlier from home.
Tuesday	Politeness toward teacher.	Failure to complete homework.	Maintain a structured log.

This "Micro-Analysis" of daily behavior through journaling (as seen in Table 3) empowers students to manage their own moral growth. It transforms character building into a personal need rather than a school obligation. The analysis of the "Mutaba'ah Journals" (Daily Activity Logs) provided a window into the students' "Internal Moral Dialogue." Field findings show that students who consistently engaged in this self-monitoring practice developed a higher degree of "Metacognitive Ethics"—the ability to think about their own moral thinking. For instance, several journals reviewed showed a pattern where students identified their own tendencies toward "Riya" (showing off) during communal prayers. This level of self-honesty is a direct result of the independent study strategy which emphasizes *Muhasabah* (self-reflection). The data suggests that this strategy shifts the locus of control from the teacher to the student, transforming the pursuit of *Akhlakul Karimah* into a personal project of self-actualization rather than a set of external rules to be followed.

Furthermore, interviews with students revealed that independent study provides a "Moral Buffer" against the negative influences of the digital world. Students reported that the habit of daily reflection made them more conscious of their time management and content consumption on smartphones. The research identifies this as "Autonomous Resistance"; because the students are trained to evaluate their own actions daily, they become more critical of the external stimuli that contradict their internalized values. This finding is crucial in the context of moral degradation, as it suggests that the most effective defense against modern ethical challenges is a robust, independent conscience. The independent study strategy at SMA Riyadlul Ulum successfully equips students with the "internal compass" necessary to navigate the unmonitored spaces of contemporary life.

### 3.5. Experiential Learning: Holistic Practice in a Pesantren Context

The final strategy involves direct experience, which the research identifies as having the most significant impact on behavior formation. By engaging in social activities and leadership roles, students "feel" the consequences of Islamic values.

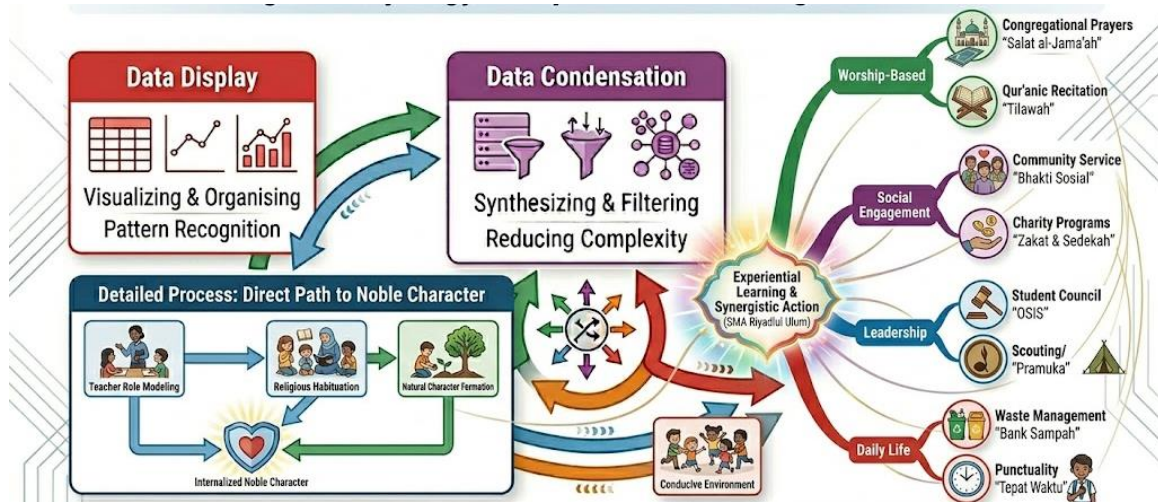


Figure 5. Synergy of Experiential Learning Domains

The diverse domains where students at SMA Riyadlul Ulum practice Islamic values through direct action. As illustrated in Figure 5, the school utilizes the *pesantren* (boarding school) infrastructure to provide a 24-hour learning laboratory. The synergy of these five strategies creates a comprehensive "moral fortress". While external factors like social media pose constant challenges to student discipline, the consistent habituation and integrated pedagogical approach provide the necessary ethical framework to navigate modern moral degradation.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The primacy of direct instruction at SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo, manifested through interactive lectures and role modeling, functions not merely as a pedagogical tool for knowledge transmission but as a foundational "Cognitive-Ethical Anchor." This approach necessitates a critical re-evaluation of the contemporary push toward purely student-centered learning, which often underestimates the necessity of authoritative moral guidance in adolescent development. Unlike the findings of Huda (2021) which suggested that direct instruction in digital eras often fails to capture student interest, the data at SMA Riyadlul Ulum demonstrates that when grounded in the concept of *Uswah Hasanah* (excellent role modeling), direct instruction becomes a powerful medium for moral internalisation. The effectiveness of this strategy arises from the ontological status of the teacher as a "Living Curriculum"; students do not merely listen to abstract rules but witness the personification of *Akhlakul Karimah*. This confirms the necessity of *Muraqabah* (spiritual self-monitoring) being modeled by educators before it can be expected from students. While Syukri, Adenan, and Syahminan (2025) argue for a reinterpretation of justice in Islamic political thought, this study grounds such abstract virtues in the immediate, tangible presence of the teacher, suggesting that justice begins with the teacher's fairness in the classroom. The "anomalous" success of direct instruction here—despite the global trend toward decentralised learning—suggests that in contexts of acute moral degradation, students require a stable, authoritative moral compass to navigate digital distractions. This stability provides a psychological safety net, allowing adolescents to anchor their identity in perennial values rather than fleeting trends. Consequently, the teacher's authority is not restrictive but liberating, providing the boundaries within which a student's moral identity can safely form and flourish, ultimately redefining the boundaries of pedagogical thoughtfulness in an age of uncertainty.

Furthermore, the implementation of indirect instruction through the habituation of religious culture

reflects a shift from "Mechanical Discipline" to "Organic Moral Absorption," providing a critical counter-narrative to secular behavioral theories. By embedding rituals such as congregational prayers, polite greetings, and the *Salam* culture into the school's daily rhythm, SMA Riyadlul Ulum fosters a "Micro-Social Ecosystem" where noble character becomes the default social currency. This observation challenges the minimalist approach to character education often found in modern secondary schools, where morality is treated as a supplementary subject rather than the school's core identity. Bustomi, Suadi, and Karim (2025) highlight the complexities of teacher-student interactions in the cyber era, suggesting a fragmentation of social bonds; yet, this study's findings indicate that a robust physical school culture can effectively act as a "Socio-Spiritual Shield" against the erosion of values caused by social media. The "Habitual Strategy" identified here does not merely produce superficial compliance; it facilitates the transition from external regulation to internal conviction. This aligns with, yet significantly deepens, the concept of religious culture proposed by Sahlan (2020), by demonstrating that habituation must be underpinned by a shared philosophical commitment to *Rahmah* (mercy) and *Ihsan* (perfection). The impact of this ecosystem is the transformation of the school environment into a *madrasah* of the soul, where environmental cues subconsciously direct behavior toward excellence. The long-term implication of this strategy is the creation of a "Moral Memory" that survives the school environment, suggesting that educational policy should prioritize cultural embedding over fragmented character "modules" or sporadic seminars.

The dialectical depth provided by interactive instruction and independent study at SMA Riyadlul Ulum addresses the "Logic of Moral Agency" that is often missing in traditional Islamic pedagogy. Through reflective group discussions and the use of daily moral journals, the school transitions students from passive recipients of doctrine to active moral agents capable of *Tafakkur* (critical reflection). This critical engagement with one's own actions—facilitated by the "Moral Journal"—functions as a diagnostic tool for the soul, allowing students to identify and rectify their own behavioral anomalies. This finding contradicts the common critique that Islamic education is inherently dogmatic and discourages critical inquiry. Instead, as seen in the work of Darmayanti et al. (2022) regarding critical thinking in character-based learning, the reflexive nature of interactive pedagogy allows students to synthesize religious values with their lived experiences. The journal acts as a private dialogue between the student and their Creator, fostering a sense of accountability (*Mas'uliyah*) that transcends the presence of teachers. This shift from surveillance to self-regulation is the pinnacle of Islamic pedagogy, as it prepares the individual for the ultimate accountability in the hereafter. By encouraging students to ask "why" they perform certain actions, the school cultivates a "Moral Intelligence" that allows for the navigation of complex ethical dilemmas in modern life, such as digital honesty and peer-driven pressure, which are otherwise unaddressed by rote memorization of laws.

Finally, the integration of experiential learning through social activities and student organizations provides the "Empirical Validation" of moral concepts, bridging the gap between theory and praxis. Whether through community service, the student council (OSIS), or public speaking practices (*Khitobah*), students are placed in situations that demand the practical application of honesty, responsibility, and empathy. This study's findings regarding the impact of organizational involvement on leadership character extend the general pedagogical framework of Saskatchewan Education (1991) into the specific domain of Islamic social ethics. Unlike traditional lecture-based PAI, this experiential approach ensures that values like *Amanah* (integrity) are tested in real-time under pressure. Mispani et al. (2026) emphasize the importance of transformational management in enhancing academic quality; similarly,

this study demonstrates that experiential character building is a form of "Transformational Pedagogy" that reshapes the student's social identity. This synergy creates a "Holistic Framework" that addresses the multidimensionality of moral degradation by providing a laboratory for "Ethics in Action." The persistent challenge of social media, identified as a primary inhibitor, suggests that pedagogical strategies must now evolve to include "Digital Asceticism" as a subset of independent study and experiential learning. Future practices must move beyond simply forbidding digital use toward training students to apply *Muraqabah* in virtual spaces, ensuring that the character built within the school walls can withstand the pressures of a globalized, digital world. This holistic ecosystem, therefore, represents a robust defense against the moral decay of the 21st century, offering a replicable model for secondary education worldwide.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

Based on the analysis and discussion regarding pedagogical strategies for character building at SMA Riyadlul Ulum Sukoharjo, this study concludes the following:

1. Pedagogical strategies in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) are implemented through a synergistic integration of five instructional models: direct, indirect, interactive, independent, and experiential learning, which collectively transform abstract moral concepts into behavioral habits.
2. Direct instruction acts as a cognitive-ethical anchor where the teacher's role as *Uswah Hasanah* (a noble role model) is the primary factor in establishing a foundational understanding of *Akhlakul Karimah* among students.
3. The creation of a religious school culture through consistent habituation (indirect instruction) serves as a socio-spiritual shield that effectively counteracts external negative influences and fosters organic moral absorption.
4. Interactive and independent learning strategies, supported by tools such as daily moral journals, successfully transition students from passive compliance to active moral agency, fostering internal accountability (*Muraqabah*).
5. Experiential learning through student organizations and social activities provides the necessary empirical validation for students to practice leadership, responsibility, and integrity in real-world social contexts.

### **5.2 Recommendations**

To address the ongoing challenge of moral degradation in the digital era, it is highly recommended that secondary schools adopt a holistic pedagogical ecosystem that balances structured classroom teaching with a strong, immersive religious culture. Educators must move beyond conventional lecturing by incorporating reflective technologies and digital ethics into the independent study curriculum to help students navigate social media pressures. Furthermore, future researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies or quantitative assessments to measure the long-term effectiveness of these five integrated strategies across diverse educational settings. A deeper exploration into "Digital Asceticism" as a specific pedagogical response to modern technological distractions would also provide significant contributions to the evolving landscape of Islamic character education.

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