



Institutional Culture and Student Character Formation: A Qualitative Inquiry in Indonesian Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how institutional culture contributes to student character formation in an Indonesian Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mambaul Ulum, Banjarejo, Pagelaran, Malang. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with teachers and school leaders, participant observation of daily school activities, and analysis of institutional documents. The findings reveal that institutional culture operates as a structured moral habituation system that systematically shapes students' character through repeated and embodied daily practices. Three core patterns were identified. First, ritualized respect as moral socialization is expressed through hand-kissing (salaman), greeting (salam), and bowing to teachers, reinforcing humility and courtesy. Second, collective spiritual practices, including communal prayers and congregational Dhuhr prayer, cultivate moral discipline and spiritual awareness. Third, communal responsibility is nurtured through cooperative routines such as collective cleaning and classroom maintenance. Overall, character formation emerges through sustained, collectively regulated practices embedded within the everyday cultural life of the madrasah.

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INTRODUCTION

Character formation has become a central concern in contemporary societies marked by rapid social change, digital disruption, and moral uncertainty (Azizah et al., 2026; Lailatul Mufarrohah, 2026). Educational institutions are increasingly expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate ethical dispositions, social responsibility, and spiritual awareness among young learners (Hikmah et al., 2026; Maqfiroh et al., 2025). The urgency of this issue is evident in growing public debates about youth behavior, declining respect for authority, and the weakening of communal values (Bisri et al., 2026; Muzedi, Hesim, 2026). Empirical reports across educational contexts indicate that cognitive achievement alone does not guarantee

moral maturity or civic responsibility (Ishmah Syafiulloh, Aisyah Nindi Antika, 2026; Zuyyina Linda Sari, Kudsiyeh, Sholi Asrori, 2026). Consequently, schools are urged to function as moral communities where values are lived rather than merely taught. Within this broader discourse, Islamic primary schools hold a distinctive mandate to integrate religious teachings with character development. Therefore, investigating how institutional culture systematically shapes students' character is both socially significant and academically necessary to inform sustainable models of value-based education.

Despite the strong emphasis on character education in policy frameworks, many educational institutions struggle to translate normative ideals into consistent daily practice (Azaim & Latif, Abdul, 2025; Lailatur Rohanita, Husnul Hilmam, 2026). Character formation is often reduced to curricular statements, moral slogans, or isolated lessons, rather than embedded in the lived experiences of students (Rahmania et al., 2026). This gap between formal intention and practical implementation creates inconsistencies in moral socialization processes. In Islamic schooling contexts, the challenge becomes more complex, as religious values are expected to guide not only instruction but also institutional life (Subairi, Muhammad Husni, 2025). However, without structured cultural mechanisms, value transmission may remain symbolic rather than transformative. The broader societal concern regarding youth discipline, respect, and communal responsibility further underscores the need to examine how schools operationalize moral education beyond textbooks (Fakhridana et al., 2026; Zaironi, 2026). Understanding the mechanisms through which institutional culture functions as a moral system is therefore crucial for addressing the persistent disjunction between declared values and embodied student behavior.

Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mambaul Ulum Banjarejo Pagelaran Malang presents a distinctive context in which character formation appears deeply embedded in everyday school life. Preliminary observations indicate that students routinely engage in ritualized forms of respect, such as greeting teachers, shaking hands, and bowing slightly upon encounter. Collective spiritual practices, including communal supplication and congregational Dhuhr prayer, structure the daily rhythm of the institution. Furthermore, cooperative routines such as classroom cleaning and shared

responsibilities reinforce communal accountability. These practices are not incidental activities but form an organized pattern of daily interaction. Rather than relying solely on formal moral instruction, the madrasah appears to cultivate character through repeated, embodied, and socially regulated actions. Such observable phenomena raise important questions about how institutional culture operates as a structured moral habituation system and how these practices contribute to sustained character development among students.

Previous studies on character education have highlighted the importance of school climate, teacher modeling, and value-based curricula in shaping students' moral dispositions (JOSHI, 2026; Muzakkir et al., 2024). Research in Islamic education has emphasized the integration of religious instruction with ethical formation, often focusing on curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, or leadership roles (Moslimany et al., 2024; Zul et al., 2026). Scholars have also explored moral habituation through routine practices and collective rituals in faith-based schools. While these studies demonstrate that institutional environments influence student behavior, many remain descriptive and fragmented. The emphasis frequently lies on individual components such as classroom pedagogy or leadership style rather than examining institutional culture as an integrated moral system. Consequently, the dynamic interplay between daily rituals, communal discipline, and embodied practices is often under-theorized (Halkier, 2020; Smith, 2025). This indicates a need for deeper qualitative inquiry into how institutional culture operates holistically as a structured mechanism for character formation within Islamic primary education settings.

Moreover, existing research often treats character formation as an outcome measured through behavioral indicators, surveys, or program evaluations, without sufficiently analyzing the cultural processes that sustain moral development over time (Martinez-Martin et al., 2021; Sostar & Ristanovic, 2023). Few studies employ in-depth qualitative approaches to explore how repeated and collectively regulated practices become internalized by students. In the Indonesian madrasah context, scholarly attention has tended to prioritize curriculum reform or policy analysis rather than everyday cultural enactments (Alhamuddin, 2025; Mufarokah et al., 2025). As a result, the subtle yet powerful role of institutional culture as moral ecology remains

insufficiently conceptualized. There is limited understanding of how ritualized respect, communal worship, and cooperative routines function simultaneously as pedagogical and socializing mechanisms (Maximov, 2016; Wang et al., 2025). Addressing this research gap is important to move beyond normative claims about character education toward empirically grounded explanations of how moral values are embodied, reproduced, and sustained within school communities.

This study advances the field by conceptualizing institutional culture as a structured moral habituation system embedded in daily embodied practices. Rather than isolating curriculum or instruction, it examines the interconnected patterns of ritualized respect, collective spirituality, and communal responsibility as a coherent cultural framework. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on how repeated and socially regulated practices generate internalized moral dispositions among students. By situating character formation within the lived culture of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mambaul Ulum Banjarejo Pagelaran Malang, this inquiry offers an empirically grounded model of institutionalized moral ecology. Such a perspective contributes to international discussions on character education by demonstrating how faith-based schooling contexts operationalize moral development through routine, collective engagement. The study thus provides both theoretical refinement and contextual insight into the mechanisms linking institutional culture and student character formation.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study addresses the following research question: How does institutional culture function as a system of moral habituation that shapes student character in an Indonesian Madrasah Ibtidaiyah? The central argument proposed is that character formation emerges not primarily from formal instruction but from repeated, embodied, and collectively regulated practices embedded within the daily life of the institution. It is hypothesized that ritualized respect, collective spiritual routines, and cooperative responsibilities operate synergistically to cultivate humility, discipline, and communal awareness among students. Through qualitative case study methods, this research seeks to demonstrate that institutional culture constitutes a structured moral framework that systematically influences students' dispositions and behaviors. By articulating this relationship, the

study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of how character education is sustained through lived institutional practices rather than isolated pedagogical interventions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a case study approach (Gammelgaard, 2017; Khan, 2019). The qualitative paradigm was selected because the research seeks to understand character formation as a socially constructed and culturally embedded process rather than as a measurable variable. Character development in Islamic primary education involves lived experiences, institutional routines, symbolic interactions, and embodied practices that require in-depth contextual interpretation. A case study design was considered appropriate as it allows for intensive exploration of a bounded system within its real-life setting. This approach enables the researcher to capture the complexity of institutional culture as a moral habituation system and to analyze how daily practices shape students' character holistically. By focusing on a single institution, the study aims to produce a thick description of cultural mechanisms that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurement or experimental control.

The research was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mambaul Ulum, located in Banjarejo, Pagelaran, Malang, Indonesia. The selection of this site was based on purposive considerations. First, the madrasah demonstrates consistent implementation of ritualized respect practices, collective spiritual routines, and cooperative responsibilities embedded in its daily institutional life. Second, preliminary observations indicated that character-related practices are systematically organized rather than incidental activities. Third, the school represents a rural Islamic educational setting where religious values are deeply integrated into communal life, making it a rich context for examining institutional culture as moral ecology. The site thus provides a relevant and information-rich case for exploring how character formation emerges through structured cultural habituation within Islamic primary education.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and triangulation (Natow, 2020; Santos et al., 2020). Participant observation was conducted to document daily routines, ritual practices, and social interactions within the madrasah (Cain & Scrivner, 2022; Shah, 2017). In depth semi structured interviews were carried out with the head of the madrasah, classroom teachers, and selected students to explore their perceptions and lived experiences of character formation processes. Institutional documents, including school regulations, activity schedules, and value statements, were analyzed to understand the formal articulation of moral principles. Field notes were systematically recorded to capture contextual details and researcher reflections. The combination of observation, interviews, and document analysis enabled comprehensive exploration of institutional culture and its role in shaping student character.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of qualitative analysis involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Mezmir, 2020; Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Data condensation was conducted by selecting, focusing, and simplifying field notes, interview transcripts, and documents relevant to institutional culture and character formation (Chand, 2025; Rashid et al., 2019). Subsequently, data were organized and presented through thematic matrices and narrative descriptions to facilitate pattern identification. Verification involved continuous comparison across data sources to refine emerging interpretations and ensure analytical coherence.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation of sources and methods, member checking with selected participants, prolonged engagement in the field, and peer debriefing (Dado et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2017). Credibility was strengthened through thick description, while dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions. These procedures enhance the rigor and reliability of the qualitative findings in accordance with international academic standards.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Institutional Culture and Student Character Formation

In the field context, institutional culture is operationally defined as a structured system of shared values, ritualized practices, behavioral norms, and symbolic interactions consistently enacted in daily school life. At Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mambaul Ulum Banjarejo Pagelaran Malang, institutional culture manifests through morning greetings, collective dhuha prayer, Qur'anic recitation, respect rituals toward teachers, and cooperative classroom responsibilities. Student character formation is thus understood not as abstract moral instruction but as habituated ethical conduct embedded in routine practice. Informants described character as reflected in discipline, responsibility, empathy, respect, and spiritual awareness. These attributes are not transmitted solely through formal lessons but cultivated through patterned repetition and modeling. Consequently, institutional culture operates as a moral ecology where values are embodied, internalized, and socially reinforced through interactional consistency between teachers, students, and school leadership.

Table 1. Interview Data

Petikan Wawancara	Indikator	Informan
"Kami membiasakan salam dan mencium tangan guru setiap pagi agar anak terbiasa hormat."	Respect and humility	Kepala Madrasah
"Shalat dhuha bersama melatih disiplin dan kesadaran spiritual."	Discipline and religiosity	Guru Kelas IV
"Kalau piket kelas tidak dikerjakan, teman lain mengingatkan."	Responsibility and peer control	Siswa
"Kami tidak hanya mengajar, tapi memberi contoh sikap sehari-hari."	Moral modeling	Guru PAI

The interview data reveal that character formation is primarily structured through habituation mechanisms rather than cognitive moral instruction. The emphasis on greeting rituals and hand kissing reflects symbolic reinforcement of respect hierarchies within Islamic educational culture. Collective dhuha prayer functions not merely as worship but as temporal regulation shaping students' discipline. The peer reminder practice indicates the emergence of horizontal moral accountability, suggesting that institutional culture extends beyond teacher authority into student social dynamics. Moreover, the statement emphasizing teacher modeling underscores the performative dimension of moral education. Teachers serve as embodied texts through which values are interpreted. Thus, institutional culture

operates simultaneously at symbolic, ritualistic, and relational levels, creating a multi-layered moral environment that fosters internalization rather than compliance alone.

A deeper reading suggests that the school's moral system is sustained by coherence between leadership vision, pedagogical practice, and student participation. Respect rituals institutionalize authority while also nurturing humility. Spiritual routines regulate time and embed transcendental awareness into daily structure. Peer accountability demonstrates early moral agency among students, indicating that culture becomes self-reinforcing. Importantly, modeling bridges the gap between normative discourse and lived ethics, minimizing moral dissonance. The data collectively illustrate that institutional culture shapes character through repetition, relational consistency, and symbolic affirmation. This process reduces fragmentation between formal curriculum and hidden curriculum, thereby strengthening ethical internalization. Character formation emerges as a communal achievement rather than an individual cognitive acquisition.

Observational data corroborate interview findings. Morning assemblies consistently begin with coordinated greetings, followed by orderly movement into collective prayer. Students demonstrate spontaneous respect gestures without direct instruction, indicating habituation. During classroom activities, group responsibilities are distributed systematically, and peer reminders occur naturally when duties are neglected. The researcher observed that teachers corrected behavior calmly while linking advice to Islamic moral principles. This alignment between discourse and action strengthens normative credibility. The patterned repetition of rituals, spatial organization of classrooms, and visible moral symbols contribute to a cohesive ethical climate. Field notes indicate that students rarely resist structured routines, suggesting internalized discipline rather than imposed control.

In summary, the data demonstrate that institutional culture functions as an integrated moral system shaping student character through ritual, modeling, discipline, and peer accountability. The consistent interaction between symbolic respect practices, collective worship, and cooperative responsibility forms a stable ethical pattern. A clear pattern emerges: leadership establishes normative frameworks, teachers embody values, and students reinforce norms through peer

interaction. Character formation is therefore cyclical and socially embedded. Rather than isolated interventions, daily routines operate as continuous moral training. This structured repetition fosters internalization of discipline, respect, religiosity, and responsibility. The findings confirm that institutional culture at the madrasah operates as a sustainable mechanism for character development.

Table 2. Ideal Influence Pattern

Jabatan Informan	Petikan Wawancara	Indikator
Kepala Madrasah	"Budaya sekolah harus mencerminkan nilai Islam dalam setiap kegiatan."	Visionary leadership moral
Guru Kelas IV	"Anak belajar karakter dari apa yang mereka lihat setiap hari."	Consistent modeling
Guru PAI	"Pembiasaan lebih efektif daripada hanya teori."	Habituation strategy
Siswa	"Kami mengikuti aturan karena sudah terbiasa."	Internalized discipline

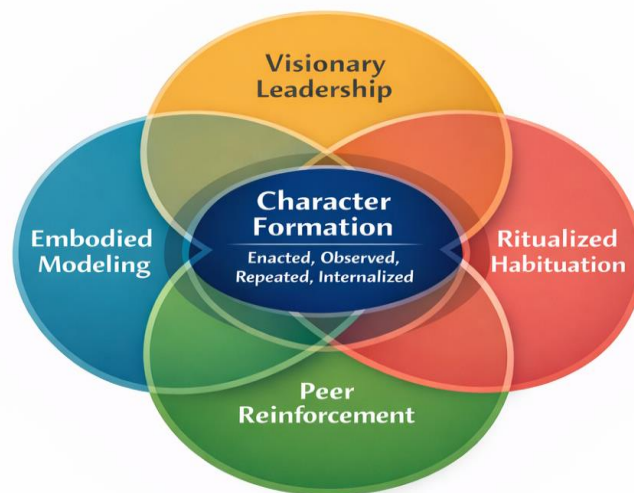
The ideal influence table demonstrates a hierarchical yet integrative moral structure. Leadership articulates normative vision, ensuring value coherence across institutional activities. Teachers operationalize this vision through consistent behavioral modeling, translating abstract principles into observable conduct. The emphasis on habituation reflects a pedagogical belief that repetition solidifies moral cognition into stable behavior. Student testimony indicates that discipline evolves from external enforcement to internal acceptance. This pattern highlights vertical alignment between institutional vision and classroom execution.

Furthermore, the data suggest that ideal influence is sustained through reciprocal reinforcement. Leadership sets direction, teachers embody norms, and students normalize expectations through habitual practice. The convergence between structural authority and lived experience reduces normative ambiguity. Consequently, institutional culture becomes self-maintaining. Character formation is neither accidental nor episodic; it is strategically cultivated through systemic coherence and continuous practice.

Across both tables, a consistent pattern emerges: institutional culture shapes character through visionary leadership, embodied modeling, ritualized habituation, and peer reinforcement. The system operates as an interconnected moral ecosystem in which values are enacted, observed, repeated, and internalized collectively.

Institutional Culture & Character Formation

An Interconnected Moral Ecosystem



Picture 1. Institutional Culture and Character Formation at MI Mambaul Ulum Banjarejo, Pagelaran Malang

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that institutional culture functions as a moral ecology shaping student character through ritualized habituation, modeling, and peer accountability (Amidu Kolawole Ajayi, Iyiade Adebuseyi, 2025; Babatunde, Toyin Blessing. Ajayi, 2025). This result aligns with character education literature emphasizing the centrality of school culture in moral internalization rather than isolated instructional strategies (Hidayati & Nihayah, 2025; Rijal et al., 2023). Prior studies argue that values become durable when embedded in routine practice and relational consistency (Akaka, 2019; Breslin, 2021). The present study confirms this proposition within the context of Indonesian madrasah education, where religious rituals and symbolic respect practices operate as structured mechanisms of ethical formation (Al-Razi, 2025; Chaoran, 2024). However, unlike some Western character education models that prioritize socio-emotional competencies in secular settings, this study reveals the integration of transcendental orientation and spiritual discipline as foundational dimensions of character development.

The emphasis on habituation resonates with virtue ethics theory, which posits that moral excellence develops through repeated action (Fhds et al., 2025; Pedersen, Michael; Dunne & Document, 2020). Similar to Aristotelian perspectives and contemporary Islamic moral pedagogy, the findings indicate that discipline and

respect emerge from structured repetition rather than cognitive moral reasoning alone. Nevertheless, the study extends existing literature by demonstrating how habituation is reinforced through peer accountability systems. While previous research often centers on teacher authority, this inquiry highlights horizontal moral reinforcement among students. Such findings suggest that institutional culture operates as a collective regulatory mechanism, reducing reliance on surveillance based discipline (Manokha, 2018; Zuboff, 2022).

The modeling dimension identified in this research corresponds with social learning theory, which underscores observational learning as central to behavioral formation (Morse et al., 2019; Schultner et al., 2024). Teachers at the madrasah embody moral values through consistent conduct, bridging the gap between normative discourse and lived practice (Al-fitroh, 2025; Irfani et al., 2025). This supports empirical studies showing that congruence between teacher behavior and institutional values strengthens moral credibility (Gokhan Kilicoglu, 2017; Murugan, 2025). However, the current study deepens this insight by situating modeling within a spiritually structured environment where ritual coherence enhances authenticity. The integration of spiritual routines with behavioral modeling differentiates this case from secular institutional contexts.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the conceptualization of institutional culture as an integrated moral system rather than a hidden curriculum. It advances the notion that character formation in Islamic primary education is sustained through cyclical interaction between leadership vision, pedagogical enactment, and student participation. Practically, the findings imply that policy interventions should prioritize cultural coherence over fragmented character programs. School leaders must align rituals, routines, and teacher conduct with articulated moral values to ensure consistency. Teacher professional development should emphasize embodied ethics alongside instructional competence.

Overall, the study confirms that sustainable character formation requires systemic alignment rather than episodic intervention. The madrasah case illustrates how ritual structure, peer reinforcement, and visionary leadership create an ecosystem conducive to moral internalization. These findings challenge approaches

that treat character as a supplementary curriculum component. Instead, institutional culture should be understood as the primary infrastructure of ethical development. The implications extend to broader Islamic educational reform, suggesting that strengthening institutional coherence may be more impactful than introducing additional moral content without cultural integration.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that institutional culture functions as a moral ecosystem that systematically shapes student character through ritualized habituation, teacher modeling, collective discipline, and peer reinforcement. The most significant finding demonstrates that character formation cannot rely solely on cognitive transmission of moral concepts but must be embedded in consistent and meaningful daily routines. At Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Mambaul Ulum Banjarejo Pagelaran Malang, values such as respect, responsibility, religiosity, and discipline become internalized through repetitive practices aligned with leadership vision and pedagogical action. The central lesson derived from this research is that character develops within a coherent system rather than through fragmented interventions. A lived and collectively enacted institutional culture serves as the foundation for sustainable moral education in Islamic primary schooling.

Academically, this study contributes to strengthening the theoretical understanding of institutional culture as an integrated moral system within Islamic primary education. It extends character education literature by positioning the madrasah as a spiritually grounded and communally structured ethical formation space rather than merely an academic institution. The conceptualization of culture as a cyclical interaction among leadership vision, teacher embodiment, and student participation enriches discussions on moral ecology in education. Through an in depth qualitative case study approach, the research offers contextualized insights into value internalization mechanisms. Its primary strength lies in integrating empirical findings with theoretical reflection, generating implications relevant for educational policy development and Islamic education reform initiatives.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations, as it focuses on a single institutional setting, thereby constraining broader generalization. While the case study design provides analytical depth, it does not allow systematic comparison across madrasahs with diverse socio-cultural contexts. Additionally, the research does not incorporate a longitudinal perspective to examine the sustainability of character outcomes over time. Future research is recommended to adopt comparative or mixed-method designs to test the consistency of institutional culture patterns across regions. Longitudinal investigations would also be valuable to assess long-term character development trajectories. Such approaches would enhance external validity and expand both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of Islamic education.

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