

## **Character-Based Curriculum Development in Early Childhood Education: A Case Study on RA (Raudhatul Athfal) in Malang**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the development of a character-based curriculum in basic education learning and to examine its implementation strategies in shaping students' character. The research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design conducted at RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran. Data were collected through direct classroom observations, in-depth interviews with the principal and teachers, and documentation analysis of curriculum materials and school activities. Data analysis was carried out using a deductive qualitative analysis technique, which involved systematic stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that the character-based curriculum development at RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran is implemented in an integrated manner within daily learning activities and the overall school culture. Character formation is fostered through teachers' role modeling, the cultivation of discipline, habituation of positive behaviors, and the creation of a conducive and religious learning environment. The implementation of this curriculum has proven effective in nurturing core character values such as discipline, responsibility, honesty, independence, and social care from an early age.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is increasingly recognized as a central mechanism for fostering not only cognitive competence but also moral integrity and social responsibility. In the context of globalization, digital transformation, and rapid socio-cultural change, societies worldwide face challenges related to moral disengagement, declining civic responsibility, and weakened ethical awareness among younger generations (Najafov, 2025; No & Sharma, 2017; Zhanbayev et al., 2023). Empirical evidence from international educational assessments and social studies suggests that academic excellence alone does not guarantee responsible citizenship or social cohesion. This condition underscores the urgent need for educational approaches that balance intellectual development with character formation. Character-based education, therefore, has gained global relevance as a strategic response to these challenges, emphasizing values such as discipline, honesty, responsibility, and empathy (Ahmad, 2024; Bahiyah, 2025; Singh, 2019). When embedded systematically within the curriculum, character education can transform schools into moral ecosystems that shape learners' behavior, attitudes, and identity (Utamirohmahsari, 2024). Consequently, curriculum development oriented toward character education is not merely pedagogical innovation but a societal necessity.

Despite growing awareness of the importance of character education, many education systems remain dominated by performance-oriented paradigms that prioritize measurable academic outcomes. Curriculum implementation is frequently driven by standardized testing, content coverage, and skill acquisition aligned with labor market demands (Mardis et al., 2017). As a result, character education is often treated as an auxiliary component rather than an integral curricular foundation (Aljohani et al., 2022; Amini, Syamsuyurnita, 2017; Lapsley, Daniel K, 2016; Njui, 2017; Watz, 2011). This imbalance has contributed to a disconnect between educational goals and learners' moral development,

manifesting in issues such as low discipline, academic dishonesty, and limited social responsibility (Adeowu, 2024; Hasan, 2025; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). In early childhood education, this problem becomes particularly critical, as foundational values and habits are formed during this developmental stage. The absence of a coherent curriculum framework that integrates character education systematically limits the effectiveness of moral instruction (Lapsley, Daniel K, 2016; Njui, 2017). Addressing this problem requires a shift from fragmented character programs toward comprehensive character-based curriculum development.

Field-level observations indicate substantial variation in how character education is enacted within early childhood education institutions. In many cases, character values are conveyed implicitly or verbally without structured reinforcement through pedagogical practices or institutional culture (Lickona, 1999; Purwaningsih & Ridha, 2024; Ukamaka & Okeke, 2025). Teachers may introduce moral concepts, yet inconsistencies in modeling, habituation, and environmental support hinder internalization among learners (Babatunde, Toyin Blessing. Ajayi, 2025; Hamdi, 2026; Hidayat, 2025; Sholikhah, Khoirun Nissa Febriyanti, Ratih Kumala Wijayanti, Miftahudin Miftahudin, Darsinah Darsinah, 2025). Conversely, institutions that integrate character values into daily routines, learning interactions, and school norms demonstrate more consistent behavioral outcomes among children. These phenomena suggest that character formation is less influenced by isolated instruction and more by the coherence between curriculum design, teacher practices, and school culture (Ahmad, 2024). However, empirical studies examining this integration remain limited, particularly in faith-based early childhood contexts. This gap highlights the importance of investigating how character-based curricula operate in real educational settings (Burns, 2012; Lyon, 2020).

Existing scholarship on character education has extensively explored conceptual frameworks, moral philosophies, and value classifications. Prior studies confirm that character education positively influences learners' moral reasoning and social behavior when implemented consistently (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Purwaningsih, 2024; Ristiana et al., 2025; Suciati et al., 2023). Nevertheless, much of the literature remains normative, focusing on ideal models rather than empirical curriculum processes (Mckernan, 2007; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017). Additionally, research predominantly targets primary and secondary education, leaving early childhood education underexplored. Studies often analyze character education as a programmatic intervention rather than as an integrated curriculum structure. Consequently, limited attention is given to curriculum development mechanisms, instructional alignment, and institutional culture as interconnected components (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Corbo et al., 2016; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Practices, 2025; Ristiana et al., 2025; Weiss et al., 2021; Zhao & Fan, 2023). This limitation constrains the applicability of prior findings for curriculum designers and early childhood practitioners seeking context-sensitive models.

Furthermore, research addressing character education within Islamic early childhood education institutions remains scarce. While some studies acknowledge the moral potential of religious-based education, they seldom provide in-depth analyses of how religious values are operationalized within curriculum design and classroom practice. The interaction between teacher role modeling, habituation strategies, and school culture is often discussed theoretically but rarely examined empirically. As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how character-based curricula function holistically in faith-based early childhood settings. This gap is significant, given the emphasis on moral and spiritual development in such institutions. Addressing this gap requires

qualitative, case-based research that captures the complexity of curriculum implementation in authentic contexts.

This study advances the field by offering an empirically grounded analysis of character-based curriculum development in early childhood education through a qualitative case study approach. Focusing on RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran, the study examines how character education is systematically embedded within curriculum planning, instructional practices, and school culture. Unlike previous research that emphasizes normative frameworks, this study highlights operational mechanisms, including teacher role modeling, behavioral habituation, and the creation of a conducive religious learning environment. The novelty of this research lies in its integrative perspective, positioning character education not as an add-on program but as a core curriculum orientation. This approach represents a meaningful contribution to contemporary discussions on early childhood curriculum innovation.

Based on the identified gaps, this study addresses the following research question: how is a character-based curriculum developed and implemented in early childhood education, and how does it contribute to students' character formation? The central argument of this study is that character education becomes more effective when embedded systematically within curriculum structures and supported by coherent pedagogical practices and school culture. By employing a qualitative case study design, this research provides in-depth insights into curriculum development processes and their practical implications. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by enriching the discourse on character-based curriculum development and practically by offering a contextual model applicable to early childhood education settings. Ultimately, this study seeks to inform curriculum policy and practice aimed at fostering holistic and value-oriented education.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a case study design (Baškarada, 2014; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Candidate et al., 2014; Creswell et al., 2007; Elizabeth, 2016; Njie & Asimiran, 2014; Sahin, 2005). The qualitative approach was selected because the research seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the process of developing and implementing a character-based curriculum within the authentic context of early childhood education. A case study design enables a holistic, contextual, and detailed exploration of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Version et al., 2017; Vohra, 2014), particularly with regard to curriculum practices, educator-learner interactions, and school culture, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. The case study approach is considered appropriate as the research focuses on a single educational institution that demonstrates distinctive characteristics in the implementation of character education. Through this design, the study provides a comprehensive portrayal of the dynamics of character-based curriculum development and the factors influencing its implementation within a specific institutional context.

The research was conducted at RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran. The selection of this site was based on several considerations. First, RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran is an Islamic early childhood education institution that explicitly implements a character-based curriculum within both instructional activities and school culture. Second, the institution demonstrates a strong commitment to students' character formation through teachers' role modeling, habituation of positive behaviors, and the creation of a religious and conducive learning environment. Third, accessibility of data and the institution's openness to research activities supported the feasibility of conducting an in-depth case study. These characteristics render RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran a representative and

relevant setting for examining character-based curriculum development in early childhood education.

Data were collected using multiple techniques, including observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Version et al., 2017; Vohra, 2014). Observations were conducted to examine classroom activities, teacher–student interactions, and the enactment of character values in daily routines and school culture. In-depth interviews were carried out with the principal and teachers to obtain comprehensive insights into curriculum planning, implementation, and evaluation related to character education. Document analysis involved the examination of curriculum documents, lesson plans, school programs, and relevant institutional records. The use of multiple data collection techniques aimed to generate rich, in-depth, and complementary data.

Data analysis followed a qualitative analytical procedure consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Baškarada, 2014; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Candidate et al., 2014; Elizabeth, 2016; Version et al., 2017; Vohra, 2014). Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation. The data were then organized and presented in descriptive narratives and thematic matrices to facilitate the identification of patterns and relationships. The verification stage involved interpreting the data and systematically drawing conclusions based on emerging themes. To ensure data trustworthiness, this study employed source and technique triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement. These strategies were applied to enhance the credibility, consistency, and reliability of the research findings.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **RESULT**

#### **Character-Based Curriculum Development in Early Childhood Education at RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran**

Based on field findings, character-based curriculum development is operationally defined as a systematic and continuous process of designing,

implementing, and institutionalizing character values through the curriculum, instructional practices, and the school's institutional culture. At RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran, the character-based curriculum is not positioned as an auxiliary program; rather, it serves as the core orientation of learning, integrated into curriculum planning, instructional strategies, and everyday social interactions. Character values such as discipline, responsibility, honesty, independence, and social care are cultivated through educators' role modeling, the habituation of positive behaviors, and the creation of a religious and conducive learning environment. Accordingly, character-based curriculum development is understood as a holistic endeavor that integratively connects pedagogical, moral, and institutional dimensions within early childhood education.

**Table 1. Interview Findings**

Interview Excerpt	Indicator	Informant
"We do not separate character education from learning. All activities, from entering the classroom until dismissal, are designed to shape children's character."	Integration of curriculum and character	Principal
"Teachers must serve as role models first. Children imitate teachers' attitudes before they understand rules."	Educator role modeling	Classroom Teacher
"Habits such as queuing, praying, and tidying learning tools are practiced daily so they become routines."	Habituation of positive behavior	Classroom Teacher
"We organize the school environment to be religious and comfortable so children feel safe and are easier to guide."	Conducive learning environment	Principal

Interview data indicate that integrating character values into the curriculum constitutes the primary strategy in character-based curriculum development. The principal's statement underscores that character education is not taught as a separate subject but is embedded across all learning activities and school routines. This reflects a paradigm shift from an instructional approach to a cultural approach, whereby character is formed through repeated and meaningful learning experiences. Such integration strengthens value

internalization because learners experience character values directly in authentic contexts rather than merely receiving normative explanations.

Beyond curricular integration, teacher role modeling and the habituation of positive behaviors emerge as key elements in implementing a character-based curriculum. Teachers are positioned as moral agents whose conduct becomes a primary reference for early childhood learners. Teachers' consistency in demonstrating discipline, patience, and responsibility reinforces the modeling process. Routine habituation further indicates that character is not shaped through sporadic instruction but through structured and repeated practices. These findings affirm that the success of a character-based curriculum depends substantially on coherence between curricular planning and educators' day-to-day practices.

Observational findings corroborate the interview data, revealing that character values are consistently enacted in daily school activities. Children are accustomed to arriving on time, following classroom rules, praying before and after activities, and taking responsibility for their learning materials. Teachers actively model positive behaviors and provide reinforcement when learners demonstrate attitudes aligned with the intended character values. A well-organized, religious, and safe school environment further supports a conducive learning atmosphere. From the researcher's interpretation, alignment among the written curriculum, instructional practices, and school culture constitutes the principal factor enhancing the effectiveness of character-based curriculum development.

In sum, the findings demonstrate that character-based curriculum development at RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran is implemented in an integrated manner and oriented toward the habituation of values in everyday life. The curriculum is designed not only to achieve academic objectives but also to foster learners' character through teacher role modeling, instructional routines, and a

supportive school environment. This approach enables learners to internalize character values naturally and sustainably from an early age.

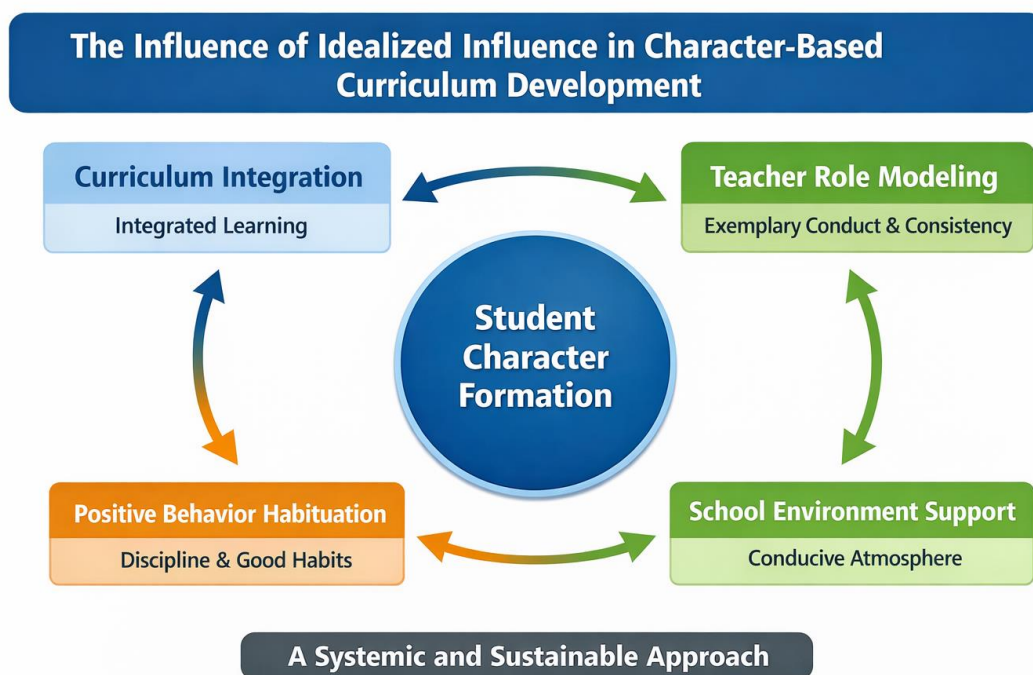
**Table 2. Ideal Influence in Character-Based Curriculum Development**

Informant Position	Interview Excerpt	Indicator
Principal	"If teachers consistently model good behavior, children will follow without the need for many commands."	Influence of role modeling
Classroom Teacher	"Children who are habituated to discipline from an early age are easier to guide and more responsible."	Impact of habituation
Classroom Teacher	"A comfortable school environment makes children calmer and more receptive to character values."	Conducive environment

The table indicates that ideal influence in character-based curriculum development derives from educator role modeling, consistent habituation, and a supportive learning environment. Both the principal and teachers concur that educators' behavior exerts a strong influence on early childhood character formation. Role modeling functions as the most effective means of value transmission because children learn primarily through observation and imitation.

Moreover, consistent habituation and a supportive learning environment establish stable behavioral patterns among learners. The data suggest that when character values are applied consistently in daily routines and reinforced by a positive school climate, learners demonstrate stronger character development. This pattern indicates that ideal character-based curriculum development requires synergy among educators, the curriculum, and institutional culture.

Overall, the data pattern shows that the success of character-based curriculum development is determined by curricular integration, consistency in teacher role modeling, the habituation of positive behaviors, and the support of the school environment. These four elements are interrelated and form a systemic unity that sustainably supports the character formation of learners.



**Figure 1. Ideal Influence in character-based curriculum development**

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with and extend existing literature on character-based education, which emphasizes that character formation is most effective when values are systematically embedded within the curriculum rather than delivered as stand-alone programs (Lesmana, 2025; Ross, 2024; Wannemacher, 2011; Wycliffe, 2016). Previous studies consistently argue that character education should be integrated into learning activities, school routines, and institutional culture to ensure meaningful internalization of values. The findings at RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran corroborate this view by demonstrating that character education is treated as a core curricular orientation, permeating lesson planning, classroom interactions, and daily school practices. This confirms the position of earlier scholars who critique fragmented character programs and advocate for a holistic, curriculum-based approach. However, this study differs from much of the existing literature by providing empirical, context-specific

evidence from early childhood education, a level that remains underrepresented in character education research.

In relation to teacher role modeling, the findings reinforce social learning perspectives that highlight imitation and observation as primary mechanisms in early childhood character development. Prior research underscores that teachers' consistency in demonstrating moral behavior significantly influences children's attitudes and conduct. The present study supports this claim, showing that educators at RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran function as moral exemplars whose behavior directly shapes learners' character. Unlike studies that focus primarily on instructional strategies or moral reasoning, this research emphasizes lived practice and daily interactions as the dominant mode of value transmission. This suggests a shift from cognitive-centered moral instruction toward relational and behavioral processes that are more developmentally appropriate for young children (Ali & Fathan, 2025; Education & Science, 2010; Larkey & Hecht, 2010; Rahman et al., 2026).

The study also confirms existing arguments that habituation and school culture are decisive factors in sustaining character education (Lisnawati et al., 2016; Rachman, 2017; Saripudin, 2015; Wahono et al., 2025). Earlier literature notes that repeated practices, routines, and a supportive environment contribute to the formation of stable moral habits (Kurz et al., 2015; Obizue, 2025; Ramaiya, 2024; Sholikhah, Khoirun Nissa Febriyanti, Ratih Kumala Wijayanti, Miftahudin Miftahudin, Darsinah Darsinah, 2025). The findings illustrate that daily routines such as praying, queuing, punctuality, and responsibility for learning materials are not peripheral activities but central mechanisms through which character values are internalized. In contrast to studies that treat habituation as a supplementary technique, this research positions it as an integral curricular strategy, thereby highlighting the interdependence between curriculum design and institutional culture.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the discourse on character-based curriculum development by strengthening the argument that character education should be conceptualized as a systemic and institutional process. The findings support holistic and ecological theories of education, which view learners' character formation as the product of interactions among curriculum structures, educator practices, and learning environments. By demonstrating the coherence between written curriculum, enacted curriculum, and school culture, this study provides empirical grounding for theories that emphasize alignment and integration in educational design, particularly within early childhood contexts.

Practically, the findings offer important implications for curriculum developers, school leaders, and early childhood educators. The study suggests that effective character-based curriculum development requires institutional commitment, consistent teacher role modeling, structured habituation, and the creation of a conducive learning environment. For policymakers and practitioners, this implies that character education should be embedded within curriculum frameworks, teacher professional development, and school management practices rather than implemented as isolated initiatives. Overall, this research highlights that sustainable character formation in early childhood education is achievable when curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture operate synergistically as a unified system.

## **CONCLUSION**

The most significant finding of this study indicates that character-based curriculum development in early childhood education is effective when it is positioned as a core curricular orientation rather than as a supplementary program. The case study at RA Raudlatul Ulum Ganjaran demonstrates that the integration of character values into curriculum planning, instructional practices,

teacher role modeling, habituation of positive behaviors, and support from a religious and conducive school environment forms an interconnected and sustainable system. The key insight derived from this research is that character formation in early childhood is most optimally achieved through consistent, contextual, and meaningful learning experiences, in which children are not merely taught values verbally but internalize them through daily routines and social interactions. Accordingly, character development emerges as the outcome of an integrated pedagogical, cultural, and institutional process.

From an academic perspective, the strength of this study lies in its contribution to advancing scholarship on character-based curriculum through in-depth empirical evidence within the context of early childhood education. This research moves beyond normative and conceptual discussions by revealing the operational mechanisms of character-based curriculum development at the institutional level, from curriculum design to its enactment within school culture. The study contributes theoretically by reinforcing a holistic and ecological perspective on character education, emphasizing the alignment among the written curriculum, the enacted curriculum, and the learning environment. Practically, it offers a contextual model that can inform educators, leaders of Raudhatul Athfal and early childhood education institutions, and policymakers in designing curricula that balance academic achievement with character formation.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the case study design focusing on a single educational institution limits the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. Second, the study did not directly incorporate the perspectives of parents and children as primary data sources, thereby constraining insights into the long-term impact of character formation beyond the institutional setting. Future research is therefore recommended to employ comparative approaches across multiple institutions or mixed-methods designs to examine the consistency of these findings in diverse contexts. Further studies

should also explore family and community involvement more deeply and investigate the long-term effects of character-based curricula on children's moral, social, and academic development.

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