

## Character Formation through Structured Habituation in an Indonesian Islamic Junior High School: A School Culture Approach

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### Abstract

Character education has become a major concern in Islamic education, particularly in developing students' moral values and daily behavior. This study explores the cultivation of character through structured habituation within the school culture of MTs Al-Khoirot Malang. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observations, interviews with teachers and students, and documentation of school programs. The findings indicate that systematic habituation integrated into daily routines significantly supports students' character development. Structured activities such as morning assemblies, uniform inspections, classroom duty schedules, and congregational prayers strengthen discipline and responsibility. Regular religious practices, including duha and dhuhr prayers and daily supplications, enhance students' religiosity and spiritual awareness. In addition, the implementation of the 5S culture greeting, smiling, polite communication, courtesy, and respect encourages positive social interaction and ethical behavior within the school community. Environmental awareness is also promoted through Friday clean up programs and scheduled classroom duties. The integration of routine activities, religious programs, teacher supervision, and role modeling creates a sustainable character-based school culture supported by consistent reward and discipline systems.

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## INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a pressing concern in contemporary societies (Acetylena & Zaironi, 2026; Zaironi, 2026b), particularly in the context of rapid social transformation (Antika et al., 2026; Azizah et al., 2026), globalization (Afandy et al., 2026; Firghol et al., 2026), and the erosion of ethical norms among

younger generations (Muqoffi et al., 2026; Ni & Zaironi, 2026). The urgency of this issue lies in the growing recognition that cognitive achievement alone is insufficient to prepare students for complex moral and social challenges (Fahrurrosi et al., 2026; Nuraini Maulidia, Sabrina Nurhaliza, Ramadhanti Syifa Salsabila, 2025; Sobirin & Zaironi, 2025). Education systems are increasingly expected to cultivate integrity, responsibility, and social awareness as integral components of student development (Fakhridana et al., 2026; Nia Hasanah, Muchammad Syamsul Ma'arif, Nurul Ma'rifah, 2025; Zaironi & Hilar, 2026). Empirical evidence from various educational contexts indicates that schools play a crucial role in shaping students' moral dispositions through both formal curricula and informal cultural practices (Arisih & Muhammad, 2026; Rohanita et al., 2026; Subairi & Zaironi, 2025). However, without deliberate and structured efforts, character formation often remains incidental rather than systematic. Therefore, it is essential to investigate effective approaches that can embed moral values into students' daily experiences. This study is important because it addresses how structured habituation within school culture can serve as a sustainable mechanism for internalizing character values, thereby contributing not only to individual development but also to broader societal well being.

Despite the acknowledged importance of character education (Rahmania & Kurnia, Fitri Ayu, 2026; Zaironi, 2026b), many educational institutions continue to struggle with its practical implementation (Bisri et al., 2026; Hikmah et al., 2026; Zaironi, 2026a). One of the central problems lies in the gap between normative educational goals and actual practices in schools. While policies and curricula often emphasize moral and character development (Hikmah et al., 2026; Nia Hasanah, Muchammad Syamsul Ma'arif, Nurul Ma'rifah, 2025), these ideals are not always translated into consistent daily behaviors among students. This discrepancy is further exacerbated by limited teacher preparedness, lack of institutional commitment, and the absence of systematic frameworks for character cultivation. In many cases, character education is treated as an additional component rather than an integral part of the learning process (Fahrurrosi et al., 2026; Mufarrohah & Zaironi, 2026; Zaironi et al., 2023). Consequently, students may demonstrate fragmented moral understanding without consistent behavioral application. This problem highlights the need for approaches that go beyond theoretical instruction and focus on experiential and habitual learning processes. Addressing this issue is crucial for ensuring that

character education is not merely symbolic but becomes an embedded and transformative aspect of schooling.

In the Indonesian context, particularly within Islamic junior high schools, various phenomena illustrate both the challenges and potentials of character education. Schools often implement religious and moral programs; however, their effectiveness varies depending on how they are integrated into daily routines (Fahmi et al., 2024; Hasnadi & Santi, 2021). Observations in several madrasah settings reveal that while activities such as congregational prayers, morning assemblies, and disciplinary checks are regularly conducted, their impact on students' character is not always consistent. In some cases, these activities are performed as formal obligations without meaningful internalization. Conversely, there are also schools where such practices are systematically organized and reinforced, resulting in observable positive behavioral changes among students. This variation suggests that the key factor lies not merely in the presence of activities but in the structure, consistency, and cultural integration of those practices. Therefore, examining how structured habituation operates within a specific institutional context becomes essential for understanding its role in effective character formation.

Previous studies on character education have explored various approaches, including value based instruction, moral reasoning development, and the integration of religious teachings into the curriculum (Boiliu, 2025; Ismail, 2025). Research has shown that explicit teaching of values can enhance students' moral awareness, while participatory and reflective learning methods contribute to deeper ethical understanding (Okeke, 2024). In Islamic educational settings, scholars have emphasized the role of religious practices and teacher exemplarity in shaping students' character (Hidayat, 2025; Rochim & Khayati, 2022). Additionally, school culture has been identified as a significant factor influencing students' behavior, as it provides a social environment where values are practiced and reinforced (Antika et al., 2026). However, much of this research tends to focus on isolated strategies rather than examining how these elements interact within a cohesive system. As a result, there remains limited understanding of how structured, routine-based practices contribute to sustained character development in real educational settings.

Furthermore, existing literature often overlooks the importance of habituation as a systematic and continuous process embedded in school culture (Fradana et al., 2024). While some studies acknowledge the role of repetition and

routine in shaping behavior (Jeremiah et al., 2025; Pedwell, 2017), they rarely provide detailed analysis of how such practices are organized, maintained, and evaluated within institutional frameworks. There is also a tendency to emphasize cognitive and affective dimensions of character education while underestimating the behavioral dimension that emerges through daily practice. This gap indicates a need for research that integrates theoretical perspectives on character education with empirical investigation of practical implementation. By focusing on structured habituation, this study seeks to bridge this gap and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how character values are internalized through consistent and meaningful engagement in school routines.

The novelty of this study lies in its emphasis on structured habituation as a central mechanism for character formation within an Islamic school culture. Unlike previous research that tends to examine discrete elements of character education, this study adopts a holistic perspective by analyzing how routine activities, religious practices, institutional norms, and teacher role modeling interact to create a sustainable character-building environment. This approach highlights the dynamic relationship between structure and culture, demonstrating that effective character education requires both systematic planning and contextual adaptation. The importance of this research is further underscored by its potential to offer practical insights for educators and policymakers seeking to develop integrated character education models. By situating the analysis within an Indonesian madrasah context, the study also contributes to the broader discourse on culturally responsive educational practices.

Based on these considerations, the central research problem addressed in this study is how structured habituation within school culture contributes to students' character formation in an *اسلامی* junior high school. The working argument of this research is that character development becomes more effective and sustainable when moral values are embedded in consistent daily practices supported by institutional structures and social reinforcement. This implies that character education should not rely solely on instructional methods but must be integrated into the lived experiences of students through routine, supervision, and exemplarity. The study further argues that a well-established system of habituation can transform abstract values into concrete behaviors, thereby bridging the gap between knowledge and practice. Through this investigation, the research aims to contribute to both theoretical and practical understandings of

character education, offering a model that can be adapted in similar educational contexts.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study (Gammelgaard, 2017; Viera, 2023) approach to explore the process of character formation through structured habituation within a specific school culture. The qualitative paradigm is selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of social phenomena, particularly those related to values, behaviors, and institutional practices that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures.

The research was conducted at MTs Al-Khoirot Malang, an Islamic junior high school in Indonesia recognized for integrating religious values into its institutional culture and educational practices. The school was purposively selected because it consistently implements structured habituation activities, including congregational prayers, Qur'anic recitation, and behavioral supervision. These practices provide a relevant context for examining character education in everyday school life. Furthermore, the accessibility of the institution and the willingness of stakeholders to participate supported the effectiveness and feasibility of the research process.

Data were collected through several qualitative techniques to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon (Khan et al., 2025). Participant observation was conducted to examine routine activities, interactions, and behavioral patterns related to character formation within the school environment. Semi-structured interviews with teachers, students, and administrators were employed to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding habituation practices. In addition, document analysis was used to review school regulations, program guidelines, and activity schedules. These techniques enabled methodological triangulation and strengthened the credibility and depth of the findings.

Data analysis followed an interactive qualitative model consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Mbanaso et al., 2023; Ravindran, 2019). Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, coding, and categorizing information obtained from observations, interviews, and documents. Subsequently, the data were organized into narrative descriptions and thematic displays to facilitate interpretation and pattern identification.

Verification was continuously conducted to ensure consistency and validity of the findings. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation, prolonged engagement, member checking, detailed contextual descriptions, systematic documentation, and reflexive practices to minimize researcher bias.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### RESULT

#### Character Formation through Structured Habituation in an Indonesian Islamic Junior High School: A School Culture Approach

The operational definition of character formation through structured habituation in this study refers to a systematic and continuous process in which moral, social, and religious values are internalized by students through repetitive, organized, and supervised daily practices embedded within school culture. In the observed setting, structured habituation is not merely routine activity, but a deliberately designed institutional mechanism aimed at transforming abstract values into observable behaviors. This includes scheduled programs such as morning assemblies, uniform inspections, classroom duties, congregational prayers, and the implementation of the 5S culture.

These practices are reinforced through teacher supervision, institutional norms, and consistent evaluation systems. As a result, character formation is understood as a lived experience rather than a theoretical construct. The emphasis lies on behavioral consistency, collective participation, and cultural reinforcement, which together create an environment where students gradually develop discipline, responsibility, religiosity, and social ethics through sustained engagement in everyday school life.

**Table 1. Excerpt from interview with informant**

| Interview Excerpt                                                                     | Indicator                  | Informant            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| "Students now arrive earlier and follow the morning assembly without being reminded." | Discipline                 | Teacher              |
| "Praying together makes us feel more aware of our responsibilities as Muslims."       | Religious awareness        | Student              |
| "We always greet teachers and friends politely every morning."                        | Social ethics (5S culture) | Student              |
| "Class duty schedules train students to take responsibility for cleanliness."         | Responsibility             | School administrator |
| "Friday clean-up activities make students more concerned about the environment."      | Environmental awareness    | Teacher              |

The data presented in the table indicate that structured habituation practices contribute significantly to multiple dimensions of character development. Discipline emerges as a foundational outcome, as reflected in students' punctuality and adherence to school routines without external enforcement. This suggests that repeated exposure to structured schedules fosters internal regulation rather than compliance based solely on authority. Similarly, religious awareness is strengthened through collective worship practices, which not only reinforce doctrinal understanding but also cultivate a sense of shared spiritual responsibility. The presence of social ethics, particularly through the 5S culture, demonstrates how interpersonal behaviors are shaped through consistent cultural reinforcement. These findings imply that character formation is most effective when values are embedded within interactive and communal experiences rather than isolated instructional contexts.

Furthermore, the integration of responsibility and environmental awareness into daily routines reflects the multidimensional nature of structured habituation. Activities such as classroom duty schedules and weekly clean-up programs function as practical platforms for students to enact values in tangible ways. This indicates that habituation operates as a bridge between moral knowledge and behavioral application. Importantly, the consistency of these practices across different domains academic, religious, and social creates a coherent system that reinforces character development holistically. The data also reveal that the role of institutional actors, particularly teachers and administrators, is crucial in maintaining the structure and continuity of these practices. Their involvement ensures that habituation is not fragmented but sustained, thereby enabling students to internalize values through repeated and meaningful participation.

Observational data further support these interpretations by revealing patterns of behavior that align with interview responses. During morning assemblies, students were observed lining up in an orderly manner, demonstrating punctuality and discipline. In congregational prayers, active participation and attentiveness indicated a level of spiritual engagement beyond mere obligation. Additionally, interactions among students and between students and teachers consistently reflected politeness and respect, particularly through greetings and courteous communication. Environmental programs such as Friday clean-up activities showed high levels of student participation, suggesting that responsibility for cleanliness had become a shared norm. These observations

confirm that structured habituation is effectively operationalized within the school environment. From the researcher's perspective, the alignment between observed behavior and reported experiences strengthens the validity of the findings and highlights the effectiveness of routine-based character education.

Restating the findings, the data demonstrate that character formation in this context is achieved through the systematic integration of structured activities into daily school life. Students develop discipline through punctuality and adherence to routines, religiosity through collective worship practices, social ethics through consistent interpersonal interactions, and environmental awareness through participatory programs. These outcomes are not incidental but are the result of deliberate institutional design and continuous reinforcement. The findings suggest that structured habituation serves as a practical mechanism for translating moral values into consistent behaviors. By embedding character education within routine activities, the school ensures that values are not only taught but also experienced and practiced by students in their everyday interactions.

The overall pattern emerging from the data indicates that character formation is most effective when supported by a coherent and integrated school culture. The combination of routine activities, teacher role modeling, institutional policies, and reinforcement systems creates a stable environment for value internalization. This pattern highlights the importance of consistency, repetition, and collective participation in shaping student behavior. Moreover, the data suggest that structured habituation functions as a dynamic process in which individual and collective dimensions of character development are interconnected. As a result, the school culture evolves into a character-based system where values are continuously reproduced through daily practices.

**Table 2. The influence of institutional roles in strengthening structured habits**

| Informant Position | Interview Excerpt                                                                   | Indicator                        |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Principal          | "We ensure all programs are implemented consistently to build students' character." | Institutional commitment         |
| Teacher            | "We act as role models because students imitate what we do."                        | Teacher exemplarity              |
| Student            | "Rewards make us more motivated to follow the rules."                               | Motivation through reinforcement |
| Administrator      | "Punishment is applied to maintain discipline and fairness."                        | Discipline system                |

The second table highlights the ideal influence of institutional roles in strengthening structured habituation. The principal's emphasis on consistency reflects the importance of leadership in sustaining character education programs. Without strong institutional commitment, habituation practices may lose coherence and effectiveness. Teachers play a central role as behavioral models, demonstrating that character education extends beyond instruction to include lived example. Students' responses indicate that reinforcement mechanisms, such as rewards, enhance motivation and encourage adherence to established norms. Meanwhile, administrative enforcement of disciplinary measures ensures that standards are maintained consistently. Together, these elements form an interconnected system that supports the internalization of values.

A deeper interpretation of this table suggests that character formation is not solely dependent on student participation but is significantly influenced by the broader institutional ecosystem. Leadership, teacher behavior, and policy implementation collectively shape the conditions under which habituation occurs. The balance between reward and punishment systems reflects a structured approach to behavioral regulation, ensuring that positive actions are encouraged while deviations are addressed constructively. This integrated system demonstrates that effective character education requires alignment between values, practices, and institutional support. The findings underscore the importance of a holistic approach in which all stakeholders contribute to the cultivation of a sustainable character-based school culture.

The pattern derived from these data indicates that successful character formation is characterized by strong institutional alignment, consistent implementation of routines, and active participation of all school members. The interaction between leadership, teacher exemplarity, and student engagement creates a reinforcing cycle that sustains habituation practices. This pattern confirms that structured habituation is most effective when it operates within a supportive and well-coordinated institutional framework.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that structured habituation embedded in school culture plays a central role in shaping students' discipline and responsibility. This result aligns with existing literature emphasizing that repeated and consistent practices are essential in transforming moral values into stable behavioral patterns (Lindström et al., 2018). Scholars of character education have

argued that discipline is most effectively cultivated through routine based engagement rather than isolated moral instruction (Ranya & KADJA, 2025). The present study supports this view by showing that activities such as morning assemblies, uniform inspections, and classroom duties foster self-regulation and accountability among students. However, unlike some prior studies that treat discipline as an outcome of external control, the findings here suggest a deeper internalization process facilitated by continuous exposure and participation. This indicates a shift from compliance-oriented behavior to self-directed responsibility. Theoretically, this reinforces the concept of habituation as a mechanism of moral development, while practically, it highlights the importance of designing structured daily routines in educational institutions.

In terms of religious character, the study confirms and extends prior research on the role of spiritual practices in Islamic education (Bolandhematan, 2019; Chanifah et al., 2021). Existing studies have shown that religious rituals, such as congregational prayers and daily supplications, contribute to students' spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity. The findings of this research are consistent with these perspectives, demonstrating that regular participation in dhuha and dhuhr prayers, as well as collective supplication, strengthens students' religiosity beyond cognitive understanding. However, this study adds nuance by illustrating how the collective and structured nature of these practices enhances their effectiveness. Rather than being individual acts, these rituals become shared experiences that reinforce communal identity and spiritual discipline. Theoretically, this suggests that religiosity is socially constructed and maintained through collective practices (Ammerman, 2020). Practically, it implies that schools should not only provide religious instruction but also create structured environments where spiritual practices are consistently performed and socially reinforced.

The development of social character and ethical interaction observed in this study also corresponds with literature highlighting the role of school culture in shaping interpersonal behavior (Rahayu et al., 2024). Previous research has identified positive school climate and value-based interactions as key factors in promoting respect, empathy, and ethical communication (Firdaus, n.d.). The implementation of the 5S culture in this study exemplifies how structured social norms can cultivate these qualities. Students' habitual use of greetings, politeness, and respectful communication reflects the internalization of ethical values through daily interaction. However, the findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that such social behaviors are not merely influenced by general

school climate but are actively constructed through deliberate and repetitive cultural practices (Rudasill et al., 2018). Theoretically, this underscores the importance of micro-level interactions in character formation. From a practical standpoint, it suggests that schools should institutionalize specific behavioral norms and ensure their consistent application to foster positive social relationships.

The findings related to environmental awareness and collective responsibility provide additional insights into the broader scope of character education. While previous studies have acknowledged the role of environmental education in fostering responsibility, they often focus on cognitive awareness rather than behavioral outcomes. This study, however, shows that structured programs such as Friday clean-up activities and classroom duty schedules effectively translate environmental values into concrete actions. Students' active participation in maintaining school cleanliness indicates that responsibility can be cultivated through collective and routine-based activities. This expands the understanding of character education by integrating ecological responsibility as part of moral development. Theoretically, it supports the view that character is multidimensional, encompassing not only personal and social ethics but also environmental stewardship. Practically, it highlights the need for schools to incorporate sustainability oriented practices into their daily routines as part of holistic character education.

Finally, the integration of all habituation practices into a coherent school culture represents a significant contribution of this study to existing literature. While many studies examine individual components of character education, this research demonstrates the effectiveness of a holistic and system-based approach. The combination of routine activities, religious practices, teacher exemplarity, and reinforcement systems creates a sustainable framework for character formation. This finding both aligns with and extends theoretical perspectives on school culture as a determinant of student behavior. It suggests that character development is most effective when supported by an integrated institutional system rather than fragmented initiatives. Theoretically, this reinforces the idea that culture serves as a medium for value transmission and internalization. Practically, it provides a model for educational institutions seeking to implement comprehensive character education programs, emphasizing the importance of consistency, collaboration, and institutional commitment in achieving long-term impact.

## CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this study lies in the confirmation that character formation becomes effective when moral values are embedded in structured, repetitive, and socially reinforced daily practices. The research demonstrates that discipline, religiosity, social ethics, and environmental responsibility are not merely taught as abstract concepts but are internalized through consistent habituation within school culture. The key lesson derived from this study is that sustainable character development requires a holistic and integrated approach, where routines, institutional norms, and teacher exemplarity function synergistically. Structured habituation transforms values into lived experiences, enabling students to develop self-regulation and moral awareness organically. This implies that character education is most impactful when it operates as a continuous process rather than a fragmented intervention. Ultimately, the study highlights that a well-organized school culture can serve as a powerful medium for cultivating enduring moral character among students.

This study offers a significant scholarly contribution by advancing the conceptual understanding of character education through the lens of structured habituation within school culture. It moves beyond fragmented approaches commonly found in previous research by presenting an integrated model that connects routine practices, institutional systems, and social interactions. Theoretically, the study enriches the discourse on character formation by emphasizing the role of habituation as a dynamic and sustained process of value internalization. It also contributes to the field of Islamic education by providing empirical evidence on how religious and moral practices can be systematically operationalized in a contemporary school setting. Practically, the study offers a replicable framework for educators and policymakers seeking to design effective character education programs. By demonstrating the interplay between structure and culture, this research provides a nuanced perspective that bridges theory and practice in educational development.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. The research is confined to a single case study at one Islamic junior high school, which may limit the generalizability of its findings to other educational contexts with different cultural, institutional, or socio-economic conditions. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative data, while providing depth and richness, may be influenced by researcher interpretation and participant subjectivity. Future research is recommended to expand the scope by including multiple sites and employing

mixed-method approaches to enhance validity and comparability. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining the long-term impact of structured habituation on students' character development beyond the school environment. Furthermore, future investigations could explore the role of family and community in reinforcing school-based character education, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of character formation across different social contexts.

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