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STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' VIRTUOUS CHARACTER THROUGH THE EXEMPLARY PRACTICES OF AKIDAH AKHLAK TEACHERS AT MIN 1 MATARAM CITY

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis implementasi keteladanan guru Akidah Akhlak dalam memperkuat akhlak terpuji peserta didik di MIN 1 Kota Mataram serta mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang mendukung dan menghambat pelaksanaannya. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain deskriptif. Partisipan penelitian terdiri atas sebelas informan yang dipilih menggunakan teknik purposive sampling, yaitu kepala madrasah, guru Akidah Akhlak, guru kelas, petugas keamanan, orang tua, dan peserta didik yang terlibat langsung dalam pelaksanaan pendidikan karakter. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña melalui kondensasi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keteladanan guru Akidah Akhlak berfungsi sebagai mekanisme pendidikan yang terintegrasi melalui pembelajaran, pembiasaan religius, budaya madrasah, dan interaksi sosial sehari-hari. Implementasi tersebut didukung oleh komitmen seluruh warga madrasah, kolaborasi antara sekolah dan orang tua, serta lingkungan belajar yang religius, sedangkan pengaruh media sosial, perkembangan teknologi digital, keterbatasan sarana, dan tingginya jumlah peserta didik menjadi kendala utama. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa keteladanan guru merupakan strategi penting dalam memperkuat akhlak terpuji peserta didik secara berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: Keteladanan Guru, Guru Akidah Akhlak, Akhlak Terpuji, Pendidikan Karakter, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the implementation of Aqidah Akhlak teachers' exemplary practices in strengthening students' virtuous character at MIN 1 Mataram City and to identify the factors supporting and constraining their implementation. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design. The participants consisted of eleven informants selected through purposive sampling, including the principal, an Aqidah Akhlak teacher, classroom teachers, a school security officer, a parent, and students who were directly involved in the character education process. Data were collected

through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings indicate that teachers' exemplary practices function as an integrated educational mechanism through classroom instruction, religious habituation, madrasah culture, and daily social interactions. The implementation is supported by the commitment of all school members, collaboration between the school and parents, and a religious learning environment, while social media influence, digital technology, limited facilities, and large student numbers constitute the primary challenges. These findings confirm that teacher exemplarity is a fundamental strategy for strengthening students' virtuous character in Islamic elementary schools.

Keywords: *Teacher Role Modeling, Aqidah Akhlak Teacher, Noble Character, Character Education, Islamic Elementary School*

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a process that extends beyond the development of students' intellectual abilities; it also aims to cultivate character and moral virtue as the foundation of both individual life and civic society (Maimun, 2015). The success of education is reflected in the development of learners who achieve a balance between the mastery of knowledge, faith, and noble character. This perspective is consistent with Al-Attas (1991), who argues that the ultimate goal of education is to develop the "good man" through the integrated concepts of *ta'lim*, *tarbiyah*, and *ta'dib*. Education is not merely concerned with the transmission of knowledge or the process of personal development; rather, knowledge should shape individuals who are conscious of themselves and their relationship with God, understand how to apply their knowledge for the benefit of themselves and others, and are able to fulfill their proper role within society (Al-Attas, 1991). Contemporary studies likewise emphasize that character education requires the integration of cognitive, moral, and spiritual dimensions in educational practice (Syahri et al., 2026). This view rests on the statement by Thomas Lickona (1991) who emphasizes the integration of the dimensions of knowing, feeling, and action as the key to character formation.

Similarly, al-Ghazali emphasizes that educators should embody the moral values they seek to cultivate, arguing that teaching becomes effective only when knowledge is accompanied by exemplary conduct (al-Ghazali, 2014, 2016; Faiz, 2024). This perspective remains highly relevant in contemporary Islamic education, where teachers are expected not only to facilitate learning but also to serve as ethical role models in students' daily lives (Chasani, 2022; Kandiri & Arfandi, 2021). Accordingly, character education in Madrasah

Ibtidaiyah should extend beyond cognitive achievement by integrating moral values into authentic learning experiences through consistent teacher exemplarity.

The rapid advancement of information technology, social media, and digital culture has introduced new challenges to students' character development (Mulyatno & Yosafat, 2022; Setiawan et al., 2025). Easy access to a vast range of information has made elementary school students increasingly susceptible to imitating behaviors they observe in both digital and social environments. The declining respect for teachers, weakening discipline, diminishing politeness in communication, and reduced commitment to religious values have become major concerns for educational institutions today (Edrizal et al., 2025). These conditions indicate that character education can no longer rely solely on classroom instruction but requires teachers who consistently demonstrate exemplary behavior in everyday life, thereby enabling moral values to be continuously internalized by students.

Teachers of Akidah Akhlak (Islamic Creed and Moral Education) occupy a particularly strategic position because they are responsible not only for delivering religious instruction but also for serving as spiritual mentors, moral role models, and facilitators of students' character development (Arif et al., 2024; Muliana & Syamzaimar, 2026). The educational significance of teacher exemplarity is supported by character education by Thomas Lickona. He explains that student acquire virtuous character by moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1991). Lickona also emphasizes that character education must center on eleven values including the instilling of core ethical values, fostering a compassionate school environment, building students' motivation to act morally, and providing opportunities for moral reflection. (Lickona et al., 2002)

These perspectives explain why teachers' consistent demonstration of religious commitment, discipline, honesty, courtesy, and responsibility provides authentic experiences through which students internalize moral values in everyday school life.

Recent studies consistently indicate that teacher exemplarity constitutes one of the central strategies for strengthening students' character. Previous research has shown that teachers play a significant role in fostering students' moral responsibility, religious values, and prosocial behaviour through daily modelling and habituation practices (Julismawati & Eliana, 2024; Muzaini & Mahmudah, 2023). Other studies further demonstrate that the effectiveness of character education depends not only on teachers' exemplary conduct but also on the integration of religious routines, school culture, and supportive learning environments (Malahati et al., 2023; Simbolon & Komariah, 2023). Collectively, these findings suggest that teacher exemplarity contributes substantially to character formation; however, they primarily describe its educational importance rather than explaining how exemplary practices operate within an integrated system of character education.

These studies collectively affirm that teachers function not only as educators but also as mentors, motivators, and moral role models who integrate religious values into both classroom instruction and school culture. Habituation strategies, such as greeting one another, collective prayer, congregational prayer, disciplined routines, courteous communication, and humane interpersonal interactions, have been shown to effectively strengthen students' religious character, responsibility, honesty, and social awareness. At the

same time, these studies indicate that the successful implementation of exemplary teaching depends upon the synergy among teachers, families, and the school environment, thereby ensuring the continuity of character development.

Despite this growing body of evidence, current research remains fragmented. Most studies investigate teacher exemplarity, school culture, religious habituation, or parental support as separate dimensions of character education. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to explaining how these elements interact as an integrated educational mechanism through which teacher exemplarity is translated into sustained character development within Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. This conceptual limitation restricts a comprehensive understanding of the processes that connect teachers' exemplary practices with students' virtuous character formation.

MIN 1 Mataram City was selected as the research site because the madrasah has cultivated a strong religious culture through teacher exemplarity and habitual religious practices in daily school activities. Preliminary observations and interviews revealed that *Akidah Akhlak* teachers consistently model religious devotion, discipline, courtesy, and responsibility while encouraging students to practice moral values in their everyday school life. These practices are reflected in routines such as greeting others, showing respect to teachers, maintaining discipline in worship, using polite language, and participating in various religious habituation activities that are implemented consistently. These characteristics make MIN 1 Mataram City a relevant context for examining the implementation of teacher exemplarity in strengthening students' virtuous character.

Moreover, MIN 1 Mataram City was selected because it is located in an urban area, where technological development progresses more rapidly than in rural settings. This condition potentially accelerates moral degradation and presents greater challenges to the internalization of virtuous behavior among students. Furthermore, the social characteristics of urban communities differ from those of rural communities, with rural societies generally exhibiting stronger communal values, whereas urban societies tend to be more individualistic. Consequently, this study is expected to provide valuable insights and practical references for fostering virtuous character among students in urban educational settings.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze how the exemplary practices of *Akidah Akhlak* teachers contribute to strengthening students' virtuous character at MIN 1 Mataram City and to identify the factors that facilitate and hinder their implementation. Rather than merely documenting forms of teacher exemplarity, this study advances existing knowledge by proposing that teacher exemplarity functions as an integrated educational mechanism in which teachers' behaviour, religious habituation, madrasah culture, and collaborative support mutually reinforce students' virtuous character development. This perspective extends previous qualitative studies that primarily described teachers' role modelling by offering a conceptual explanation of how exemplary practices are translated into sustainable character formation within Islamic elementary education.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to obtain an in-depth understanding of how Akidah Akhlak teachers' exemplary practices contribute to strengthening students' virtuous character at MIN 1 Mataram City. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings within their natural educational setting.

The research was conducted at MIN 1 Mataram City, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, over an intensive fieldwork period from 15 June to 23 August. The site was purposively selected because it has developed a strong religious culture in which teacher exemplarity and daily religious habituation constitute central components of character education. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling. To be included in the study, participants were required to have direct involvement in the implementation, supervision, or experience of character education programmes within the madrasah and to possess relevant knowledge related to the research objectives. Initial access was facilitated by the principal, who identified potential participants, while the final selection was undertaken by the researcher based on these inclusion criteria. The study involved eleven participants: one principal, one Akidah Akhlak teacher, three teachers, one security guard, one parent, and four students. Each participant represented a different perspective on the implementation of teacher exemplarity.

Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted throughout the fieldwork period to examine teacher exemplarity during classroom instruction, religious habituation activities, and everyday interactions within the school environment. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences regarding exemplary practices, character strengthening, and factors supporting or constraining their implementation. Documentary evidence, including the madrasah profile, character education programme documents, activity records, and photographs, was used to complement and verify the primary data.

The trustworthiness of the findings was established through source triangulation and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from the principal, teachers, the security guard, the parent, and students, whereas methodological triangulation was achieved by comparing evidence derived from observations, interviews, and documentary analysis. These procedures enhanced the credibility and dependability of the findings.

Data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview recordings were first transcribed verbatim and integrated with observation field notes and documentary evidence. The researcher repeatedly read the data to gain familiarity with participants' experiences before assigning initial descriptive codes to meaningful statements related to teacher exemplarity and students' virtuous character. Similar codes were then grouped into categories based on conceptual similarities and subsequently synthesized into broader themes. Data analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process, allowing emerging categories and themes to be

continuously refined through constant comparison across participants and data sources. Finally, conclusions were verified by cross-checking evidence from interviews, observations, and documents to ensure the consistency and credibility of the findings.

Table 1 – Example of Data Analysis.

Raw Data (Interview/Observation Excerpt)	Initial Code	Category	Final Theme
We always strive to integrate Islamic values into every subject. For instance, when teaching the story of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), I connect his attributes to behaviors that students should emulate, such as honesty, trustworthiness, and care for others. (Azizi, Akidah Akhlak Teacher, Interview, 6 August 2025)	Integration of Islamic values; contextual moral teaching; prophetic role modelling	Integration of moral values into classroom instruction	Exemplary practices of Akidah Akhlak teachers
We strive to demonstrate to students firsthand how praiseworthy character traits such as patience, respect, and care are put into practice. A simple example is that we always offer a sincere greeting to students every morning and show appreciation whenever they do something good. (Muhabbah, Teacher, Interview, 7 August 2025)	Greeting students; positive reinforcement; modelling virtues	Daily exemplary behaviour	Exemplary practices of Akidah Akhlak teachers
This daily routine aims to familiarize students with Islamic values, thereby naturally shaping their religious conduct. For instance, during the morning Quran recitation, we also teach the proper etiquette of reading the Quran so that students do not merely focus on the recitation itself but also grasp the moral character they ought to embody. (Teacher, Interview, 8 August 2025)	Religious habituation; moral internalization; Qur'an etiquette	Character-building through religious habituation	School culture supporting students' virtuous character
Routine activities such as morning prayers, Quran recitation sessions, dhikr, Inspiration Day, and Literacy Day along with unstructured practices like fostering mutual	Religious programmes; school culture;	Madrasah culture supporting character education	School culture supporting students' virtuous character

respect and using polite language, serve to strengthen students' virtuous character. Weekly and annual programs, such as family religious gatherings and intensive short-term Islamic courses (pesantren kilat), further reinforce this by providing a deeper understanding of religious teachings. (Marlina, School Principal, Interview, 8 August 2025)	routine activities		
We feel that the communication established with the madrasa is excellent, and we also have the contact details for our child's homeroom teacher, making it easy for us to communicate with them. At home, we also strive to practice the values and habits taught at the madrasa. (Fatimah, Student's Parent, Interview, 11 August 2025)	Parent-school communication; value reinforcement at home	School-family collaboration	School culture supporting students' virtuous character
At MIN 1 Mataram City, a major challenge in fostering praiseworthy character among students is social media; while we do not permit students to bring mobile phones to the school, they can access social media at home, where the content they view on TikTok and other platforms can influence their behavior and mindset. (	Exposure to TikTok content; Digital platform consumption; Changes in student behavior; Shifts in mindset	Exemplary practices problems	Challenges in Implementing Exemplary Practices

Table 1 illustrates the analytical pathway from raw qualitative data to the final themes. Initial descriptive codes were generated from meaningful interview and observation excerpts, grouped into conceptually related categories, and subsequently synthesized into overarching themes through iterative comparison across data sources following the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the strengthening of students' virtuous character at MIN 1 Mataram City is achieved not only through the delivery of *Akidah Akhlak* instructional content but also through the implementation of teachers' exemplary conduct,

which is embedded within the madrasah culture and students' daily habituation practices. The findings identify three principal aspects: (1) Exemplary practices of akidah akhlak teachers (2) School culture supporting character strengthening (4) Challenges in strengthening students' character.

The analysis of interview, observation, and documentation data generated three major themes that explain how the exemplary practices of Akidah Akhlak teachers contribute to strengthening students' virtuous character at MIN 1 Mataram City. The themes emerged through a systematic coding and thematic analysis process. Table 2 summarizes the main themes and sub-themes identified from the qualitative data before each theme is described in detail in the following sections.

Table 2 – Thematic Tabel

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Code	Source of Evidence
Exemplary Practices of Akidah Akhlak Teachers	Building shared moral commitment	Sincere educational intention (<i>ikhlas</i>); Educating with love; Shared commitment with parents	Interview, Observation, Documentation
Exemplary Practices of Akidah Akhlak Teachers	Demonstrating disciplined behaviour	Teacher punctuality; Compliance with school regulations; Professional responsibility; Neat appearance	Interview, Observation
Exemplary Practices of Akidah Akhlak Teachers	Modelling religious practices	Guided Qur'an recitation; Congregational <i>Dhuha</i> prayer; Integration of Islamic values into lessons	Interview, Observation, Documentation
Exemplary Practices of Akidah Akhlak Teachers	Providing continuous guidance and advice	Moral reinforcement during instruction; Linking prophetic values with daily behaviour; Continuous character guidance	Interview
School Culture Supporting Students' Virtuous Character	Religious school environment	Character-oriented school vision; Teacher code of conduct;	Interview, Observation, Documentation

		Leadership commitment	
School Culture Supporting Students' Virtuous Character	Collaboration among school stakeholders	Parent-teacher partnership; Shared responsibility; Class community	Interview, Documentation
Challenges in Implementing Exemplary Practices	Internal challenge	Lack of infrastructure and an excessive number of students	Interview
Challenges in Implementing Exemplary Practices	External challenge	Influence of social media	Interview

Exemplary Practices of Akidah Akhlak Teachers

The thematic analysis identified that the strengthening of students' virtuous character at MIN 1 Mataram City was primarily facilitated through the exemplary practices consistently demonstrated by Akidah Akhlak teachers. The analysis revealed four interrelated forms of exemplary conduct: building a shared moral commitment, demonstrating disciplined behaviour, modelling religious practices, and providing continuous guidance and moral reinforcement. These practices were consistently observed across classroom learning and daily school activities, indicating that character education was implemented not only through instructional content but also through teachers' everyday behaviour.

1. Building Shared Moral Commitment

The findings indicate that strengthening students' virtuous character began with establishing a shared moral commitment among school stakeholders. This commitment was grounded in the madrasah's vision of nurturing students with Islamic values and was reinforced through collaboration between teachers, school leaders, and parents. Rather than relying solely on classroom instruction, character education was framed as a collective responsibility shared by the entire school community. The principal emphasized that the foundation of character education lies in sincere intention and collaborative commitment:

"The most fundamental aspect of educating students is to begin by straightening our intention solely for the sake of worshipping Allah. We educate children with love as our primary foundation while building a shared commitment to work together in creating an Islamic generation that is intelligent, skilled, pious, and possesses virtuous character."

This commitment was further strengthened through collaboration with parents. As one teacher explained *"We establish a shared commitment between teachers and parents through regular meetings as a way of working together to cultivate students' virtuous character in the madrasah."*

School observations also confirmed the implementation of this shared commitment. Teachers consistently demonstrated exemplary behaviour by arriving at school punctually, dressing neatly, and interacting with students using polite and respectful language. These daily practices reflected the school's collective commitment to modelling the moral values expected of students.

2. Demonstrating Disciplined Behaviour

The findings indicate that disciplined behaviour constituted a central dimension of the exemplary practices demonstrated by *kidah Akhlak* teachers. Rather than merely

instructing students to obey school regulations, teachers consistently embodied discipline through their daily conduct. This was reflected in their punctuality, professional responsibility, neat appearance, and consistent adherence to institutional regulations, allowing students to observe discipline as a lived value rather than an abstract concept.

The school's commitment to discipline was reinforced through institutional regulations that explicitly required teachers and educational staff to serve as role models for students. Teachers are required to sign an agreement regarding the system that has been established.



Figure 1 - Teacher and Educational Staff Code of Conduct

As documented in the figure 1, teachers are expected to arrive at school on time, wear appropriate uniforms, maintain a neat and respectful appearance, carry out instructional duties professionally, demonstrate exemplary behaviour, collaborate with colleagues, and refrain from smoking within the school environment. The regulations are complemented by a tiered sanction system, ranging from individual guidance for minor violations to intensive coaching or mutation.

3. Modelling Religious Practices

The findings indicate that Akidah Akhlak teachers strengthened students' virtuous character by consistently modelling religious practices in both formal learning activities and the broader school environment. Rather than limiting religious instruction to classroom explanations, teachers actively demonstrated Islamic values through daily worship, Qur'an recitation, and the integration of religious values into the teaching and learning process. This consistent practice enabled students to observe religious values as lived experiences that could be applied in their daily lives.

Observational data revealed that religious activities constituted an integral part of the madrasah's daily routine. Every morning, students participated in collective Qur'an recitation in the school courtyard under the supervision of their teachers. During this activity, teachers listened to students' recitation, corrected pronunciation and tajwid errors, and provided immediate guidance in a proper and polite manner.



Figure 2 – School Activities

The modelling of religious values was also embedded in classroom instruction. Rather than teaching Islamic values in isolation, teachers integrated them into lesson content by connecting religious concepts with students' everyday behaviour. As explained by one Akidah Akhlak teacher:

"We always strive to integrate Islamic values into every lesson. For example, when teaching the story of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), I relate his noble qualities to behaviours that students should emulate, such as honesty, trustworthiness, and caring for others."

These findings demonstrate that religious modelling at MIN 1 Mataram City extended beyond ritual observance to include the integration of Islamic values into classroom instruction and everyday interactions, thereby providing students with authentic examples of virtuous conduct in both religious and educational contexts.

4. Providing Continuous Guidance and Moral Reinforcement

The findings reveal that exemplary practices were reinforced through continuous guidance beyond formal classroom instruction. Teachers regularly provided advice, reminders, and moral reflections during daily school activities, enabling students to connect religious teachings with practical situations encountered in their everyday lives. This ongoing reinforcement contributed to maintaining the consistency of students' moral development throughout the educational process. These findings align with the results of interviews with teachers that say:

"We usually link our weekly sessions to issues relevant to the students' lives for example, discussing the importance of honesty during exams or the value of helping a friend in need."

Meanwhile, outside the classroom, to providing continuous guidance and moral reinforcement, teachers have reached an agreement with students' parents to monitor their conduct outside of school. One of the teacher stated, *"The strategy we employ is collaborating with students' parents to supervise student."*

Overall, these findings suggest that the exemplary practices of Akidah Akhlak teachers were manifested through consistent daily behaviour rather than isolated instructional activities. The integration of moral commitment, disciplined conduct, religious practice and continuous guidance formed a coherent approach to strengthening students' virtuous character within the madrasah environment.

5. School Culture Supporting Students' Virtuous Character

The findings indicate that the exemplary practices of Akidah Akhlak teachers were reinforced by a school culture that consistently promoted character education. Rather than relying solely on individual teachers' initiatives, MIN 1 Mataram City established an institutional environment in which religious values and collaborative relationships among school stakeholders became integral components of students' daily educational experiences. Two interrelated aspects emerged from the analysis: a religious school environment and collaboration among school stakeholders.

Religious School Environment

The findings demonstrate that character strengthening was supported by a religious school environment in which Islamic values were consistently embedded in daily routines. Religious activities were not limited to classroom instruction but formed part of the school's everyday culture. Observations revealed that students participated in collective Qur'an recitation while teachers supervised and corrected their recitation when necessary. Weekly congregational Dhuha prayers accompanied by seven-minute religious talks further reinforced the integration of religious practice into students' daily lives. This is further reinforced by the school principal's statement during an interview: *"Every corner of the madrasa is designed to cultivate noble character in the children—whether through the décor, the facilities, or the culture we have built."*

The effect of principal's argument strengthen by school security guard *"Students sometimes pause to read the Islamic phrases on the school walls like receiving a small reminder of their faith and at times, they recite them as if those values have become a part of who they are."*

Collaboration among School Stakeholders

The findings further reveal that strengthening students' virtuous character was supported by collaboration among school stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, and parents. Character education was implemented through a shared commitment that emphasised collective responsibility rather than individual efforts. The principal highlighted that the foundation of this collaboration was the shared intention to educate students sincerely for the sake of worship and to nurture them with compassion while working toward the madrasah's vision of developing intelligent, skilled, pious, and virtuous learners.



Figure 3 - Collaborative meeting between the school and students' parents

At MIN 1 Mataram, the key to character building lies not only with teachers at school but also with parents at home. As the principal stated:

"We shared commitment to work together in creating an Islamic generation that is intelligent, skilled, pious, and possesses virtuous character." In another interview, the principle also tell that *"our strategy involves collaborating with parents and establishing class-based parent associations to keep track of students even when they are outside the school environment"*

The findings suggest that collaboration among school stakeholders created a supportive educational environment in which character strengthening became a collective responsibility. The alignment of school leadership, teachers, and parents contributed to maintaining consistency between character education implemented at school and the support provided at home.

Challenges in Implementing Exemplary Practices

The findings indicate that although the exemplary practices of Akidah Akhlak teachers contributed positively to strengthening students' virtuous character, their implementation was not without challenges. The analysis identified two categories of challenges: internal challenges originating from the school context and external challenges arising from influences beyond the school environment.

1. Internal Challenges

The findings reveal that one of the primary internal challenges concerned the limited educational infrastructure and the large number of students under teachers' supervision. These conditions required teachers to provide character guidance to many students simultaneously while working within existing institutional resources. As a result, maintaining continuous supervision and providing individualised moral guidance became increasingly demanding.



Figure 4 - An overwhelming number of students

Based on the researcher's observations, the high number of students also has the potential to create an uncondusive learning environment. This issue aligns with the complaints voiced by teachers, who stated, *"So far, one of the challenges we face in teaching here is the limited space relative to the large number of students at our madrasa."*

Despite these constraints, observations indicated that teachers continued to implement exemplary practices through daily interactions, religious activities, and

classroom instruction. To address this, the teachers divided the classes into two shifts: the first running from morning to midday for lower-grade students, and the second from midday to afternoon for upper-grade students. This finding suggests that although institutional limitations affected the implementation process, they did not diminish teachers' commitment to fostering students' virtuous character.

2. External Challenges

The findings further indicate that the influence of social media represented the most significant external challenge in strengthening students' virtuous character. Teachers reported that students were increasingly exposed to digital content that was not always consistent with the moral and religious values promoted in the madrasah. Consequently, teachers were required to reinforce positive values continuously and encourage students to apply Islamic principles when interacting with digital media. The Principle state:

“Our greatest challenge in fostering praiseworthy character among students is social media. Although we do not permit students to bring mobile phones to school, they can access social media at home; the content they view on TikTok and other platforms can influence their behavior and mindset.”. One of the teachers even complained *“Our challenge is the mobile phones they hold when they are outside of school!”*

This issue is evidenced by a statement from a student who said, *“As soon as I got home from school, I immediately grabbed my phone to open TikTok and play games.”*

To address this issue, teachers strive to strengthen synergy and collaboration with parents. Class associations are established to monitor progress and provide mutual support in educating the children. Activities involving both teachers and parents are also organized to maintain strong bonds; while teachers supervise students at school, parents oversee them at home. This is reinforced by the results of an interview with a teacher, who stated that *“We collaborate with parents to monitor students and ensure they do not spend excessive time on social media at home”*.

While it may seem simple, it has an impact. As one parent stated in an interview, *“We feel the communication with the madrasah is very good. We also have contact information for our child's homeroom teacher. This makes it easy for us to communicate with them. At home, we also try to implement the values and habits taught at school.”*

Discussion

Exemplarity Practice of Akidah Akhlak Teacher

Four dimensions of the exemplary practice of Akidah Akhlak teachers emerge because moral education in Islamic elementary schools is integrated not only into formal instruction but also into daily religious practices. The elements function effectively because they operate as a sustainable system driven collaboratively by the school, students, and parents, thereby directly shaping a religious school culture. The habits fostered by teachers through both in-class and extracurricular programs are grounded in modeling and teaching virtuous values; this cultivates the students' moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action components identified by Lickona (1991) as the foundation of character formation. At MIN 1 Mataram City, moral knowing is implemented by integrating Islamic values and the Prophet's character traits into the curriculum, as well as through school activities like the Friday seven minute preach that provide moral understanding. Moral feeling is fostered through teachers serving as role models and the cultivation of a religious school culture

where noble character is nurtured. Meanwhile, moral action is encouraged by involving students in the school's religious activities.

What distinguishes the researcher's findings at MIN 1 Mataram City from Thomas Lickona's views is the teachers' mindset and the nature of character formation; it is not merely horizontal or based on human-to-human relationships but also vertical, rooted in the relationship between the servant and God. This approach is demonstrated by teachers who prioritize a divine intention before educating students, as reflected in the statement: *"The most fundamental aspect of educating students is to begin by straightening our intention solely for the sake of worshipping Allah."* This expands upon Lickona's character theory by showing that moral character need not be exclusively horizontal; it can also be vertical. In other words, the two moral principles like relationships with others and the relationship with God can operate in tandem toward a single goal: instilling noble values in students as the core of their character.

This similarity is also grounded in the concept of "moral knowing" proposed by Thomas Lickona, which posits that to act correctly, a child must distinguish between right and wrong. At MIN 1 Mataram City, moral knowing is not based solely on reason but is rooted in Islamic values reinforced by rationalization; this confirms the researcher's finding that rationalization can operate in tandem with theologically grounded Islamic values.

However, the researcher did not further explore the extent to which theological Islamic values align with Lickona's rationality-based moral values. This presents an opportunity for future research to examine the relationship between the two, given the often significant gap between values rooted in faith and those rooted in logic.

School Culture Supporting Virtuous Character Strengthening

The moral habits and commitments shared by teachers, students, and parents shape the school culture at MIN 1 Mataram City, which indirectly strengthens students' good morals. This finding supports the opinion of Lickona, Schap, and Lewis (2002) that schools must be caring communities. The synergy between parents and teachers fosters the development of good morals in students not only at school but also at home. Parental synergy is essential and can be a key factor in shaping a child's character (Feranina & Komala, 2022; Hasibuan, 2023)

School culture is also manifested not only in the teacher's system but also in the layout and decoration, which have been shown to have a positive impact on students. The well-conditioned school environment, both teaching and layout, subconsciously plays a role in fostering good morals in students. Students who unconsciously use good phrases in school, evidence that school culture, including decoration, is effective in instilling good values in students. Unfortunately, researchers cannot definitively determine the effectiveness of school layout and decoration in strengthening good morals in students. This is because not all decorations have the same effect. Too many pictures can backfire by causing image pollution, and improper placement of decorations can also render posters ineffective. Therefore, further research on this issue could lead to breakthroughs in the role of school decorations like posters, calligraphy, and pictures in shaping students' admirable personalities. Penelitian terdahulu menemukan bahwasanya sekolah yang memiliki

pajangan minimalis bisa meningkatkan konsentrasi belajar peserta didik (Bonghanoy et al., 2024).

Challenges in Implementing Exemplary Practices

Internally, the school faces primary challenges regarding facilities and a high student population, while externally, social media presents a major issue. These challenges arise because MIN 1 Mataram is a highly sought-after school; its students come from various urban and rural areas, with some even arriving from outside the region. Unfortunately, the high demand for enrollment is not matched by adequate classroom space and facilities. The school manages the overcrowding by implementing a shift system to alleviate congestion. However, the internal facility-related issues remain unresolved because the school is hemmed in by residential housing, making new construction impossible. Yet, this limitation can also be viewed as an advantage; the scarcity of facilities provides students with opportunities to practice kindness and cultivate praiseworthy traits, such as sharing and yielding to those in need. To foster moral action, schools must provide real-world opportunities and challenges that allow students to engage in good deeds (Lickona, 1991; Lickona et al., 2002).. According to Lickona, Schap, and Lewis (2002), repeated moral experiences foster the habits that shape a student's virtuous character. Students can learn responsibility through the shared use of facilities and can act as peacemakers and problem-solvers when conflicts or other issues arise.

The primary challenge facing schools actually stems from an external source: social media. Social media poses a problem because students encounter negative influences that subsequently shape their behavior. This aligns with the findings of previous researchers regarding how digital culture has become a major issue in contemporary education (Mulyatno & Yosafat, 2022; Setiawan et al., 2025). Schools have implemented various measures, such as strengthening ties with parents, to address this issue collaboratively. The cultivation of virtuous character traits by Aqidah Akhlaq teachers plays a significant role in shaping student conduct and fostering moral responsibility, religious values, and prosocial behavior through daily modeling and habituation practices (Julismawati & Eliana, 2024; Muzaini & Mahmudah, 2023). The moral responsibility and religious values instilled by these teachers can serve as a crucial mechanism, providing students with the moral restraint needed to avoid unethical actions whether at school, at home, or in the digital realm.

Implications for Educational Theory and Practice

The findings of this study contribute to the development of character education theory from the perspective of Islamic education. Teacher exemplarity should not be viewed merely as an aspect of teachers' personal competence but also as a pedagogical strategy that is systematically integrated into madrasah culture, religious habituation programs, and social interactions within the school environment. These findings broaden the understanding that students' moral development results from the interaction between teachers' personal exemplarity and an educational system that consistently supports the internalization of moral values.

The study also highlights the importance of strengthening a religious school culture through collaboration among principals, teachers, parents, and students. Habituation

programs are more likely to achieve their intended outcomes when accompanied by the consistent demonstration of moral behavior by all members of the school community. Therefore, teacher professional development should not focus exclusively on pedagogical competence but should also prioritize the enhancement of personal and social competencies, which constitute the essential foundation of effective teacher exemplarity.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in only one madrasah, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*. Second, the study employed a qualitative approach; therefore, the findings emphasize the depth of understanding rather than the breadth of coverage. Third, the study focused primarily on the perspectives of the principal, teachers, and students, and thus did not explore in depth the perspectives of parents regarding the continuity of students' moral development within the family environment.

These limitations provide opportunities for future research to employ diverse research designs, such as a mixed methods approach, in order to examine the effectiveness of teacher exemplarity more comprehensively. Future studies may also investigate the influence of teacher exemplarity on students' moral development in the context of digital media use and family involvement as educational partners, thereby addressing the existing research gaps.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Akidah Akhlak teachers strengthen students' noble character through an integrated approach combining teacher role-modeling, the habitual practice of religious values, madrasah culture, and collaboration with parents. Research findings also indicate that this process is supported by institutional commitment and a conducive school culture, yet it faces challenges from the influence of digital media and limited institutional resources.

These findings suggest that character education in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) should not rely solely on curriculum content but must integrate teacher role-modeling into the school culture and family partnerships. Consequently, teacher professional development needs to strengthen teachers' personal and moral competencies alongside their pedagogical skills.

Future research should examine teacher role-modeling across various madrasah contexts and explore how digital literacy and family involvement influence students' character development.

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