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Enhancing Moral Development in Early Childhood: Evidence from Effective Learning Practices

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ABSTRACT

Background of the study: Moral values encompass teachings about good and bad behavior, attitudes, duties, ethics, and manners that shape a child's future role in society. Early Childhood Education (ECE) occurs during the golden age, a critical period when children are highly receptive to learning and habit formation. Through repeated exposure to good behavior, children can be shaped into individuals of noble character. Therefore, teachers play a key role in guiding learners to internalize strong moral values, which contribute not only to their moral integrity but also to their intellectual development.

Aims and scope of paper: This study explores how moral and religious values are instilled in children through Islamic-based early childhood education at RA Al-Amien. It focuses on the learning strategies employed by educators, the integration of Islamic teachings into the curriculum, and observable behavioral outcomes in children that reflect moral development.

Methods: This qualitative study utilized passive participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Informants included the principal, teachers, and students at RA Al-Amien. Data were analyzed following the Miles and Huberman model, involving data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Results: RA Al-Amien consistently integrates Islamic teachings across six domains of child development. Children are guided to memorize prayers and Hadiths, demonstrate respectful behavior toward adults, and show kindness to peers. This structured moral training supports the development *of akhlaqul karimah* (noble character).

Contribution: Islamic-based early childhood education at RA Al-Amien effectively promotes moral and religious development. Through daily practice and teacher guidance, children show measurable progress in internalizing moral development, reinforcing the value of moral education in early formative years.

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INTRODUCTION

Moral education, also referred to as Religious and Moral Values, constitutes a fundamental aspect of early childhood development and should be stimulated from an early age. The early years, often termed the "golden age" of development, are a critical period when children are highly receptive to learning and habit formation. It is during this period that foundational values are most effectively internalized, making it essential for educators and parents to instill moral principles that will guide children's behavior throughout their lives. Moral education during this stage plays a crucial role in shaping a child's character, fostering a sense of empathy, discipline, honesty, respect, and responsibility traits that form the bedrock of *akhlaqul karimah* (noble character) (Ding et al., 2023; Li & Koenig, 2025; Wahlers et al., 2024; Yuliana & Busyro Karim, 2024).

Instilling moral values in children is not merely an educational goal but a broader social necessity (Nadlifah et al., 2024). In a world increasingly marked by moral relativism, consumerism, and the erosion of traditional values, the early cultivation of morality becomes a preventive measure against future behavioral issues and social dysfunction. Moral education significantly influences children's behavior, noting that their moral development is highly dependent on environmental factors such as parenting style, teacher behavior, peer interaction, and media exposure. These environmental influences either reinforce or contradict the values taught at home and school, making a holistic and integrated approach to moral education indispensable.

The urgency of moral education becomes even more pronounced in light of the current moral decline observed in various social contexts. The influx of new values, ideologies, and lifestyles are often disseminated through digital media which can lead to confusion and identity struggles among children if not counterbalanced by strong moral guidance. In such circumstances, early childhood education institutions have a strategic role in reinforcing consistent, value-based education. Teachers are not only facilitators of learning but also moral exemplars whose actions, language, and interactions leave a lasting impression on young learners.

Raudhatul Athfal (RA) Al-Amien, an early childhood education institution located on Jl. Nangka VII, Perumnas Banyuajuh, Kamal, Bangkalan, is one such example of a school that integrates religious values into all aspects of its educational practice. Founded in 1999 and operating under the auspices of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, RA Al-Amien applies an Islamic-based curriculum that prioritizes moral development as a core learning objective. The school's vision is to nurture a generation that is not only intellectually competent but also spiritually and morally grounded. This institution was selected as the research site for the present study due to its consistent commitment to embedding Islamic values in daily learning experiences, thereby making it a relevant and insightful setting for examining the development of moral education in early childhood.

At RA Al-Amien, moral development is not taught as a separate subject but is infused into every learning activity through a method of continuous habituation. For instance, children are encouraged to greet one another with Islamic salutations, practice patience in waiting their turn, respect their teachers, maintain cleanliness, and recite prayers before and after activities. The habituation process is reinforced daily and is supported by the consistent behavior of the teachers and principal, who act as role models for the children. This method of internalizing values through repetition and example aligns with classical conditioning theory as developed by Ivan Pavlov ("Pavlov, Ivan Petrovich (1849–1936)," 2015). According to Pavlov, a neutral stimulus can elicit a conditioned response when repeatedly associated with an unconditioned stimulus. In the context of early childhood moral education, the teacher functions as a conditioning agent who models desirable behavior that children eventually imitate and internalize through repeated exposure (Corr & Perkins, 2006; "Pavlov, Ivan Petrovich (1849–1936)," 2015).

This process of value internalization is both cognitive and affective. Children begin by observing behavior, then practicing it with guidance, and finally demonstrating it independently. As they are praised and affirmed for exhibiting good behavior, these moral actions become

embedded in their character. This illustrates the principle that values are not merely taught, but "caught" through experience and reflection.

The development of Religious and Moral Values is also supported by national regulatory standards. According to the Indonesian Directorate General of Islamic Education Regulation No. 2761 of 2019, children in early childhood Islamic institutions are expected to meet certain developmental milestones in religious and moral domains. These include, but are not limited to: memorizing at least ten *Asmaul Husna* (Names of Allah), knowing the pillars of Islam and faith *(rukun Islam dan rukun iman)*, performing basic prayer movements, reciting short daily prayers (*do'a*) and phrases of remembrance (*kalimat thayyibah*), identifying the five *Ulul Azmi* prophets and ten angels, understanding the importance of cleanliness, recognizing examples of good and bad behavior, demonstrating respectful greetings, and memorizing short surahs from the *Qur'an*. These benchmarks serve not only as academic goals but also as formative guides that help assess the internalization of moral values in a measurable and structured way.

This study is framed within this educational and regulatory context, with the aim of exploring how early childhood education at RA Al-Amien cultivates moral values through Islamic-based instruction and daily practices. Specifically, the study investigates the strategies employed by teachers to integrate religious and moral values into learning activities, the role of habituation and modeling in value transmission, and the observable outcomes of these efforts in children's daily behavior. By focusing on both the content and the method of moral education, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into effective moral pedagogy in Islamic early childhood education settings.

In addition to contributing to the academic discourse on moral education in early childhood, the study also aims to inform practitioners and policymakers about the practical implementation of moral education through habituation, role modeling, and faith-based curricula. The goal is to offer a replicable model of character education that can be adapted and applied in other early childhood institutions with similar visions and values.

Thus, through a comprehensive examination of the strategies and outcomes of moral education at RA Al-Amien, this study aims to reinforce the importance of integrating religious and moral development as a central pillar in early childhood education. It highlights how foundational values, when taught consistently and meaningfully, can prepare children to become morally responsible, spiritually aware, and socially competent individuals in the future.

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach, which seeks to understand the meaning of experiences and phenomena that occur in the field. The research focuses on exploring how moral values are developed in early childhood through Islamic-based education. The phenomena observed in the learning environment at RA Al-Amien Kamal serve as the basis for data interpretation and thematic analysis.

Research Subjects

The study was conducted at RA Al-Amien, located on Jl. Nangka VII, Perumnas Banyuajuh, Kamal, Indonesia. The subjects involved in this research include the school principal, teachers, and pupils. The purposive sampling technique was used in the study, a non-random sampling method in which the researcher selects participants based on specific characteristics that align with the objectives of the study. This approach ensures that the selected participants can provide rich and relevant information to address the research questions.

Data Collection

The data collection techniques employed in this study included observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted on 2025, at RA Al-Amien. During the observation, the researcher recorded the behaviors, interactions, and teaching practices related

to moral education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school principal, teachers, and students to gain deeper insights into the implementation of moral values in daily learning. In addition, documentation such as lesson plans, student work, and institutional records was used to triangulate the data gathered through observation and interviews.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction stage, the researcher organized and selected relevant data from observations, interviews, and documentation. The data display phase involved presenting the information in a structured format such as narrative descriptions or tables to facilitate interpretation. Finally, in the conclusion drawing stage, the researcher identified patterns and meanings that answered the research questions, while continuously verifying the findings for accuracy and credibility (Miles et al., 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the school administration. Written informed consent was secured from parents or guardians, and all data were anonymized in accordance with ethical standards for research involving minors.

RESULTS

At RA Al-Amien Kamal, efforts to instill moral values are systematically integrated into the daily learning process. The institution implements the 2013 Curriculum holistically, emphasizing six areas of child development, including religious and moral values. Moral education is not treated merely as a separate subject but is embedded in all classroom activities and school culture. Based on interviews, one teacher explained that moral education is continuously practiced through habituation activities in everyday learning. The teacher stated:

> "Moral values are not only taught through explanations, but through daily habits such as praying, greeting, apologizing, sharing, and respecting teachers and friends." (Teacher Interview, 2025)

The implementation of moral education begins from the moment children arrive at school. Each morning, students are guided to recite opening prayers, prayers before learning, short surahs, hadiths, and daily supplications. Children are also introduced to Islamic teachings such as Asmaul Husna, the names of prophets and angels, and the pillars of Islam and faith. These religious routines are intended not only to strengthen spiritual understanding but also to cultivate discipline and respectful behavior from an early age. One teacher explained:

> "Every morning the children recite prayers, short surahs, and Asmaul Husna together before learning begins. Through repetition, they gradually memorize and practice these values in daily life." (Teacher Interview, 2025)

Moral education at RA Al-Amien is reinforced through direct practice and real-life application. Teachers actively guide children when conflicts or mistakes occur during classroom interaction. For example, when a child interrupts a peer or behaves impolitely, the teacher encourages the child to recognize the mistake and apologize appropriately. This approach helps children develop empathy, self-awareness, and responsibility. According to one classroom teacher:

> "If a child disturbs a friend or speaks harshly, we immediately guide them to apologize and explain why the behavior is not good." (Teacher Interview, 2025)

In addition, children are trained to ask permission before leaving the classroom, borrowing belongings, or participating in certain activities. These practices foster respect for others and help children understand social norms and boundaries.

Another important aspect of moral education at RA Al-Amien is the cultivation of sharing and generosity. Teachers consistently encourage students to share food, learning materials, and

attention with classmates. During snack time, children who bring food are encouraged to share with friends who may not have brought any. Beyond classroom activities, students are also introduced to humanitarian values through charitable activities organized by the school. One teacher described this practice as follows:

> "We teach children to share with their friends, especially during snack time. The school also involved students in donation activities for disaster victims, such as the earthquake victims in Palu." (Teacher Interview, 2025)

These activities help children develop compassion, social awareness, and a sense of responsibility toward others.

Teachers also play a central role as moral role models. At RA Al-Amien, teachers are expected to demonstrate positive attitudes, respectful language, patience, honesty, and kindness in their daily interactions. Children learn moral behavior not only through instruction but also through observation and imitation of their teachers' conduct. One participant stated:

> "Children imitate what teachers do. Therefore, teachers must speak politely, be patient, and show good behavior because children learn from examples." (Teacher Interview, 2025)

Respect and etiquette are continuously emphasized throughout school activities. Children are trained to greet teachers politely, shake hands before entering and leaving the classroom, queue patiently, and communicate respectfully with peers and adults. Classroom observations showed that students were able to follow instructions attentively, wait for their turns, and respond politely during learning activities. These behaviors indicate that moral values have gradually become internalized through consistent habituation.

Furthermore, leadership activities are used to strengthen children's confidence and responsibility. Students are given opportunities to lead prayers, recite short surahs, and read aloud in front of their classmates. Through these activities, children learn responsibility, self-confidence, and respect for communal rituals. One observed activity involved a student confidently leading classmates in reciting the Hijaiyah and Latin alphabets while other students listened attentively and respectfully.

Moral development at RA Al-Amien is also fostered through everyday social interactions that nurture empathy and emotional awareness. Children are encouraged to help friends who fall, comfort classmates who are upset, and patiently wait in line during activities. Although simple, these interactions contribute significantly to the development of emotional intelligence and moral maturity in early childhood.

The findings indicate that the moral education practices implemented at RA Al-Amien align with theories emphasizing habituation in child development. Repetitive exposure to positive behaviors, combined with teacher modeling and reinforcement, gradually shapes children's moral character. The consistent implementation of daily moral routines enables children to internalize values such as discipline, respect, empathy, responsibility, and cooperation.

These findings are also consistent with the standards established by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia through the Directorate General of Islamic Education, which emphasize early childhood competencies in moral and religious development, including the ability to recite prayers, recognize Islamic teachings, demonstrate respectful behavior, and distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate actions. RA Al-Amien operationalizes these goals effectively through routine activities, teacher guidance, and value-based learning experiences integrated into daily classroom practices.

DISCUSSION

Early childhood, encompassing the age range from birth to six years, is widely recognized as a foundational period in human development. During this stage, children undergo significant changes across various domains- physical, cognitive, emotional, and moral (Nunes et al., 2025; Şandor, 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Zakharin & Bates, 2025). The rapid neurological development during these years supports the acquisition of habits and dispositions, including those related to moral conduct.

Maria Montessori's educational philosophy supports this understanding by highlighting the existence of "sensitive periods" in a child's life (Demangeon et al., 2023; Morssink-Santing et al., 2024; Turós, 2024). These are moments when children display an intense interest in particular aspects of their environment and are especially receptive to learning specific skills or values. According to Montessori, during these sensitive periods, learning occurs more effortlessly and efficiently (Mbakile-Mahlanza et al., 2020; Sablić et al., 2025). Therefore, educators and caregivers are encouraged to introduce key moral values during this time to maximize the internalization and practice of ethical behavior.

Behaviorist theory posits that human behavior is primarily shaped by interactions with the environment. In this framework, learning occurs as a response to external stimuli, with reinforcement (either positive or negative) playing a pivotal role in encouraging or discouraging behaviors ("Learning from a Behaviorist Perspective," 2023; Murtonen et al., 2017). When children are repeatedly exposed to positive behavioral models and are reinforced for demonstrating moral behaviors such as sharing, apologizing, or helping others; they are more likely to adopt these behaviors as part of their internal value system.

At RA Al-Amien, a kindergarten with a strong Islamic foundation, these principles are applied in a structured and consistent manner to support the moral development of children. The institution emphasizes habituation, or the repetition of desirable behaviors within the classroom environment, as a key strategy. Teachers introduce moral actions not only through explicit instruction but also through modeling, routine practice, and consistent reinforcement. Daily rituals such as beginning the day with prayer, reciting short *Qur'anic* verses, and engaging in respectful greetings serve to establish a moral rhythm in the children's lives.

One of the most effective aspects of RA Al-Amien's approach is the emphasis on modeling behavior, in which teachers act as moral exemplars for their students. Children naturally imitate the actions and language of adults around them, especially those in authority roles. Teachers at RA Al-Amien understand this developmental tendency and take care to demonstrate patience, kindness, honesty, and respect in their interactions with students and peers. The consistency between what is taught and what is modeled ensures that moral values are not merely theoretical concepts but lived experiences within the school community.

The integration of Islamic teachings further enriches the moral education process. Religious values such as sincerity, patience, truthfulness, and generosity are introduced through stories of prophets, practical activities like sharing food, and participation in charity events (Chin et al., 2024; Filimonau et al., 2023; Singh Yadav & Kumar Kar, 2025; Suryani et al., 2025; Yasin et al., 2020). These values are not only taught but are practiced in ways that make them meaningful and accessible to young children. For instance, children are encouraged to donate part of their snacks or small savings to support peers or people affected by disasters, such as earthquake victims in Palu. Such activities build empathy and social awareness, fostering a sense of moral responsibility and communal belonging.

Children are also encouraged to recognize and correct moral missteps. When conflicts arise such as fighting over toys or speaking disrespectfully to others, teachers guide children to reflect on their actions, apologize, and reconcile. This practice develops moral reasoning and helps children learn that actions have consequences, both for themselves and others. Over time, this reflective process contributes to the development of conscience and internal moral regulation, aligning with Lawrence Kohlberg's early stages of moral development, which emphasize obedience, fairness, and mutual respect.

Moreover, the learning environment at RA Al-Amien is structured to support moral growth through predictability and consistency. Classrooms are arranged to encourage cooperative play and respectful interaction. Routines are established so that children know what is expected of them and what they can expect from others. Such consistency enhances a sense of security and order, which is essential for the development of self-discipline and moral understanding.

The role of language in moral development is also notable. Teachers use respectful and affirming language when speaking to children, modeling how to express thoughts and emotions appropriately (Bulla et al., 2025; Lam et al., 2025; Salem et al., 2025). In turn, children learn to

communicate their needs, resolve conflicts, and express gratitude or remorse through words rather than disruptive behavior. Vocabulary related to Islamic ethics and moral concepts is embedded in daily conversation, making these ideas part of the child's functional language repertoire.

Additionally, peer interactions are harnessed as learning opportunities. Group activities, such as cooperative games and team projects, provide children with real-time experiences of fairness, negotiation, leadership, and mutual support. When these activities are facilitated by attentive educators, they become fertile ground for moral learning. Teachers observe interactions closely, stepping in when necessary to guide discussions or resolve misunderstandings, always reinforcing the principles of respect, empathy, and cooperation.

Another key element is the partnership between school and family. Moral education is most effective when there is alignment between the values promoted at school and those practiced at home. RA Al-Amien encourages parental involvement through regular communication, home assignments that reinforce moral learning, and parent-teacher meetings. When children see a consistent moral message across all contexts, they are more likely to adopt and internalize those values. The school also invites parents to model behavior during school events, reinforcing the idea that moral education is a communal responsibility.

However, moral development is not without its challenges. Children develop at different rates, and some may struggle with impulse control, empathy, or understanding social rules. Teachers at RA Al-Amien are trained to identify such developmental delays and provide additional support through one-on-one guidance or modified activities. This individualized approach ensures that all children have the opportunity to progress in their moral development at their own pace.

Implications

The findings of this study hold significant implications for early childhood education practices, particularly in religiously integrated learning environments. By emphasizing moral development through habituation, modeling, and Islamic values, this research demonstrates how early exposure to ethical behavior fosters the formation of noble character (*akhlakul karimah*) in young children. Educational institutions can adopt similar strategies to embed moral instruction into daily learning routines, especially in contexts where character formation is as valued as cognitive development. Moreover, the success of RA Al-Amien in creating a morally conscious learning environment shows that schools are not only sites for academic learning but also vital spaces for cultivating social and ethical responsibility from an early age. The integration of home and school values is also a key implication, highlighting the need for sustained parent-teacher collaboration in moral education.

Research Contribution

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in early childhood education by presenting a practical model of Islamic-based moral education applied through behaviorist principles and habituation. It bridges theoretical frameworks such as Montessori's sensitive period, behaviorist learning theory, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, with culturally embedded practices in an Indonesian Islamic preschool context. The study also enriches the literature on character education by showing how moral values can be effectively internalized through consistent rituals, role modeling, and community engagement. Additionally, it provides empirical evidence supporting the integration of moral and religious education within the national early childhood curriculum, which is often underexplored in global academic discourse.

Limitations

Although this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the research was conducted at a single institution (RA Al-Amien), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other early childhood educational settings, especially those with different religious,

cultural, or socio-economic contexts. Second, the data relied primarily on qualitative methods such as observation and interviews, which, while rich in depth, may be subject to researcher bias or interpretation. The absence of longitudinal data also limits the ability to assess the long-term effects of moral habituation on children's character development. Furthermore, the study did not experimented directly, which could have added another layer of understanding regarding their perception of moral values and behaviors.

Suggestions

Future research should consider expanding the sample to include multiple early childhood institutions across diverse regions to better understand the variations in moral education practices. Longitudinal studies would be particularly beneficial in tracking the lasting impacts of moral habituation and character education on children's behavior into later stages of schooling. Additionally, incorporating mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative and quantitative data could provide a more comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of moral education strategies. From a practical standpoint, early childhood educators should receive regular training on culturally relevant moral education strategies, including how to model positive behavior and implement routine-based moral instruction. Schools are also encouraged to involve parents more systematically, creating shared moral goals and reinforcing ethical behavior both at home and in school. Policymakers, especially in faith-based educational systems, should consider formulating guidelines that support the integration of moral and spiritual development into early childhood curricula.

CONCLUSION

Moral and character education at RA Al-Amien is effectively implemented through consistent habituation and active engagement in meaningful activities. Children are encouraged to internalize moral values not merely through instruction, but through concrete actions such as giving charity, expressing gratitude, showing respect, and practicing empathy in daily interactions. These practices allow children to experience and embody the moral concepts taught by their teachers in real-life contexts. Moreover, the school's approach to assessing moral development through observation of behavior and continuous teacher guidance offers a practical and contextually relevant model for early childhood moral education. The implementation at RA Al-Amien demonstrates that integrating moral instruction into everyday routines can significantly contribute to the formation of noble character *(akhlakul karimah)* in young learners. This model can serve as a valuable reference for other early childhood institutions aiming to foster ethical and responsible individuals from an early age.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Jagneet Kaur: Conceptualization and Writing original draft. **Elizabeth Ifeoma Anierobi:** Methodology and Writing original draft**. Gorica Popovska Nalevska:** Formal Analysis and Writing -Review & Editing. **Mohammed Xolile Ntshangase:** Resources and Software. **Tomas Shivolo:** Validation and Writing -Review & Editing. **Doris Chasokela:** Writing original draft. **Erepamowei Diri:** Formal Analysis and Writing original draft. **Muhammad Abdul Latif:** Data Collection, Writing original draft, and Writing -Review & Editing. **Kudakwashe Manokore:** Writing original draft, and Writing -Review & Editing.

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