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Implementation of character education at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam: an exploration of role strategies and impact

Diajeng Tiara Anjani[1], Zailani[2], Nur Rahmah Amini[3]
[1,2,3]Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
E-mail: diajengtiara29@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Character education is crucial in addressing moral decline in the digital age, and character education in religiously based educational institutions plays a strategic role in integrating religious values and social ethics. This study aims to analyze the implementation of character education at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam, focusing on its roles, the strategies employed, and its impact on student behavior. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with the vice principal for curriculum affairs, teachers, and students, as well as document analysis. The results indicate that the implementation strategies were carried out through three main approaches: modeling, habit formation, and environmental conditioning. The impact of the program was reflected in students' religious discipline, independence, leadership, and communication ethics. However, the program still faces challenges in the form of environmental and family-related barriers that affect the quality of graduates. This study concludes that program consistency, curriculum refinement, and harmonious synergy among the school, parents, and the surrounding environment are key factors in the successful internalization of character education at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam.

Keyword: character education; educational strategies; character impact; smp Muhammadiyah

Corresponding Author:
Diajeng Tiara Anjani,
Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara,
Jl. Kapten Muchtar Basri No.3, Glugur Darat II, Kec. Medan Tim., Kota Medan, Sumatera Utara 20238, Indonesia
Email: diajengtiara29@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Character education is a fundamental constitutional mandate of Indonesia's national education system. As stipulated in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, education aims not only to foster intellectual excellence but also to shape the character and civilization of a dignified nation. Within the Islamic framework, education also seeks to cultivate individuals of noble character who are faithful, God-fearing, and possess moral integrity and social responsibility. According to Haidar Musyafa (2021), character education is a conscious effort to instill values of goodness that become habitual through habituation. The focus is not merely on knowing what is right (*moral knowing*), but also on loving the truth (*moral loving*) and consistently practicing goodness (*moral doing*).

However, the social reality of today's globalized era, accompanied by increasingly complex technological advancements, reveals an alarming moral decline among adolescents. Many students still exhibit inappropriate behavior in social interactions, including premarital relationships, violations of Islamic dress codes—such as wearing tight-fitting or transparent clothing and headscarves that do not properly cover the chest—as well as smoking, using inappropriate language, drug abuse, gang fights, theft, low levels of discipline, and a lack of concern for environmental cleanliness, such as littering. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (2024) show the prevalence of risky behaviors among adolescents, including smoking among individuals aged 18 years and below. In addition, the National Commission for Child Protection (2023) reported a significant increase in cases of violence against children. The *Global Youth Tobacco Survey* (2023) also indicates an upward trend in smoking among adolescents aged 13–15 years, while child marriage cases in Indonesia remain relatively high.

These facts emphasize that character education is not merely an optional supplement but an urgent necessity to protect the younger generation from moral degradation. Cognitive mastery alone is insufficient without the development of strong moral character. Students require guidance and support to understand and practice Islamic character values in all aspects of learning activities. Teachers, as key members of the academic community, play a strategic role in implementing the educational vision by internalizing character values into learning processes across all subjects and fostering students' moral development. This aligns with the view of E. Mulyasa, who defines internalization as the process of embedding and learning values so that they become ingrained within individuals. According to Mulyasa, the stages of value internalization in character education include: (1) value transformation, in which educators explain good and bad values to students, and (2) value transaction, in which educators and students engage in two-way dialogue through real-life examples. At this stage, educators focus more on students' mental attitudes and personalities than on their physical appearance (Hidayaturokhman et al., 2024).

From an Islamic perspective, this concept is closely related to morality (*akhlaq*). Imam Al-Ghazali, in *Ihya Ulumuddin*, emphasizes that morality is an inner disposition deeply rooted within a person, developed through habituation and exemplary conduct rather than through the mere transfer of cognitive knowledge. This means that moral character is not simply reflected in outward actions but is the result of consistent habits, role modeling, and continuous practice until such values become embedded in one's personality. Therefore, Islamic character education emphasizes the internalization of values through daily practice rather than solely teaching concepts of right and wrong. Exemplary conduct (*uswah hasanah*) serves as the best educational method, as stated in Al-Qur'an, Surah Al-Ahzab verse 21: "Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah you have an excellent example." This verse affirms that the success of character education begins with the presence of exemplary role models. Furthermore, previous studies indicate that character education in an Islamic context emphasizes the transformation of the soul through the internalization of religious values, noble morals, discipline, and responsibility (Kadza & Lighoyati, 2024).

In response to this moral decline, SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam, as a formal Islamic educational institution, plays a strategic role in producing graduates with strong Islamic character who embody the ideal of *Khairu Ummah*. In practice, Islamic character education at the school integrates the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah into the curriculum and teaching methods. The school employs a holistic approach to character development that encompasses both vertical relationships with Allah SWT (*habluminallah*) and horizontal relationships with fellow human beings and the environment (*habluminannas*). This approach includes the habituation of worship practices, the cultivation of noble morals, and the application of Islamic values in daily life. The ultimate goal is to produce a generation of Muslims who are not only intellectually capable but also possess strong moral integrity and are able to contribute positively to society and civilization (Murdianto, 2024).

This approach is consistent with the educational philosophy of Muhammadiyah, which has long emphasized education grounded in faith, knowledge, and action. The ISMUBA curriculum reflects Muhammadiyah's educational philosophy by integrating Islamic values, Muhammadiyah principles manifested in attitudes and behavior, and language proficiency as a means of communication and intellectual development (Mundofi, 2024). According to Murdianto (2024), Islamic character education represents a synthesis between the concepts of character and education within Islam. Mujahid & Madum (2025) define Islamic character education as a process of personality formation based on the values of the Qur'an and Sunnah aimed at developing human potential toward becoming a complete and virtuous human being. This definition highlights the continuous nature and clear objectives of Islamic character formation.

Therefore, the study entitled *"The Implementation of Character Education at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam: An Exploration of Strategies and Impacts"* focuses on an in-depth analysis of the implementation of character education at Muhammadiyah schools, particularly examining the roles and processes of modeling, habituation, and environmental conditioning, as well as how these efforts contribute to shaping students with strong moral character.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive methods. This research design was chosen to provide an in-depth description of the implementation of character education at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam. Specifically, this study adopts a case study design focusing on the roles, strategies, and impacts of character education implemented at the school.

This study was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam, located in Deli Serdang, North Sumatra. The selection of this location was based on the school's characteristics as an Islamic educational

institution with a strong commitment to fostering students' moral character. The research was conducted during the odd semester of the 2026 academic year.

Data collection in this study was carried out using three main techniques. First, observation was conducted to directly examine the roles, strategies, and impacts of character education practices within the school environment. Second, in-depth interviews were conducted to explore teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the process of internalizing character values. Third, document analysis was employed to support and strengthen the findings obtained from observations and interviews.

All collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. This analytical approach was applied to ensure the validity, consistency, and depth of the exploratory findings. The informants in this study included the vice principal for curriculum affairs, teachers, and students at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Research Results

Based on the key findings of the study, which were obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam, the following presents the results of the analysis from the perspectives of various key informants, including the vice principal for curriculum management, teachers, student representatives, and other sources. All findings are clearly presented in relation to character education within the school ecosystem.

1) The Strategic Role of SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam in Character Education

SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam stands as a strategic private educational institution located in the heart of the urban area of Lubuk Pakam, Deli Serdang, North Sumatra. Urban areas, where the flow of information circulates more rapidly—which can lead to both negative and positive impacts—require strong efforts to instill good character. Therefore, this study examines the role of SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam as a facilitator of character values, serving a total of 126 students—70 boys and 56 girls—by internalizing Islamic values across all subjects, implementing habit-forming programs, and shaping the educational environment to ensure that students become accustomed to engaging in positive activities.

This is outlined in the school's mission statement, as detailed in the School Curriculum Document (*Kurikulum Satuan Pendidikan*), namely, providing education integrated with Islamic values and Muhammadiyah teachings, fostering virtuous behavior, and cultivating a culture of daily worship. Furthermore, SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam serves as an agent of social change within the community by encouraging students to actively contribute to social activities, *da'wah*, and community service. The school is not merely a place for the transfer of knowledge but also functions as a moral ecosystem and stronghold. This means that the institution does not focus solely on intellectual excellence but also serves as a platform for the internalization of character education, since education is the gateway to shaping students who will later contribute values to society.

The school also functions as a protective environment that filters students from the negative influences of globalization and unhealthy social interactions outside the school through teacher supervision and guidance. Education is viewed as a vital process through which students are nurtured into dignified individuals grounded in Islamic principles. In line with the school's vision, *"To Produce Graduates Who Are Religious, Noble in Character, Healthy, Intelligent, Globally Competitive, Possess Leadership Spirit, and Care for the Environment,"* this vision is translated into a series of holistic missions integrating Islamic values into educational practices.

Character development is supported by the school's comprehensive ecosystem. In addition to representative classrooms, the availability of science laboratories and computer laboratories supports scientific and technological literacy. Furthermore, the development of psychomotor skills and student resilience is facilitated through various sports facilities, including futsal, tennis, and volleyball courts, as well as unique rock-climbing facilities. These facilities and infrastructures function not only as physical resources but also as supporting instruments in implementing character education.

Moreover, as a Muhammadiyah educational institution, the value of pioneering leadership is deeply integrated to produce students who are independent, proactive, and capable of becoming role models (*uswah hasanah*) in driving social change. The relevance of this curriculum is increasingly crucial in the digital era, where the character of a "pioneer" is transformed into an individual who is not only technologically proficient but also possesses strong moral awareness based on the values of *Al-Furqan* in distinguishing truth from

falsehood. Based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the synergy between instructional materials and organizational activities ultimately aims to produce graduates who balance ritual devotion and social responsibility (Hayati & Aniati, 2025). Thus, each student is prepared to become an individual of strong character.

2) Implementation of the Three-Pillar Strategy for Internalizing Character

Based on observations, SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam implemented a three-pillar strategy consisting of modeling, habituation, and conditioning.

Habituation is a character education process aimed at internalizing Islamic values. Muhammadiyah schools implement numerous habituation programs to support character strengthening, as the ideal Muslim is expected to be conscious not only in thought but also in practice. As emphasized by Amini et al., (2019), habituation is not merely a routine activity but an effort to transform spiritual values into concrete behavior. Amid the challenges of the disruptive era, strengthening character through habituation becomes increasingly important.

The habit-forming programs implemented include the following:

First, literacy and daily worship programs, such as Qur'an recitation and Islamic studies, are conducted before the learning process begins to calm students emotionally and mentally prepare them for study. Qur'an recitation takes place in classrooms every morning, while Islamic studies are conducted on the school grounds.

Second, collective prayer sessions are held daily by students and teachers in the prayer room under the direct supervision of teachers. These activities function as acts of humility, surrender, and devotion to Allah SWT.

Third, Qur'an memorization (*tahfidz*) programs are implemented to encourage students to memorize the entire Qur'an (30 *juz*), thereby strengthening Islamic character through the memorization of Allah's words and cultivating love for the Qur'an.

Fourth, congregational prayers, including Dhuha and Zuhr prayers, are performed daily. Students take turns leading the prayers under teacher supervision. Funeral prayer practices (*fardhu kifayah*) are also introduced as part of religious training.

Fifth, a culture of generosity is fostered through charity and community service activities designed to strengthen philanthropic values, social compassion, and *habluminannas* relationships.

Sixth, a culture of discipline and ethics is implemented through the 4S program (*Salam, Sapa, Senyum,* and inspection). Greetings, salutations, and smiles represent the application of Islamic interaction ethics within the school environment. Meanwhile, "inspection" refers to daily discipline checks to ensure students wear complete uniforms, including caps, ties, emblems, and headscarves, in order to foster neatness and obedience to school regulations.

Seventh, talent and leadership development programs are implemented through extracurricular activities, including field *da'wah* conducted every Saturday as a means of training students' public speaking skills.

Eighth, the Muhammadiyah Student Association (*Ikatan Pelajar Muhammadiyah* / IPM) functions as a student development program integrating spiritual, intellectual, and social dimensions.

Ninth, scouting and self-defense activities, including scouting programs and *Tapak Suci*, along with various sports activities, are conducted to strengthen students' physical and mental resilience.

Tenth, the Ramadan program includes *pesantren kilat* activities such as Qur'an recitation, short religious lectures delivered alternately by teachers and students, ablution (*wudhu*) demonstrations, and Qur'an completion (*khatam*) activities.

Eleventh, ISMUBA-based academic integration aligns character values with subjects such as *fiqh*, Arabic language, *aqidah akhlak*, Qur'an-Hadith studies, and Muhammadiyah studies.

Modeling refers to the process of providing exemplary behavior. In this strategy, teachers and school staff act as a "living curriculum" by positioning themselves as direct role models in shaping students' character. Teachers lead the internalization of values through practice-based learning. According to the curriculum department, the habit of reciting the Qur'an before lessons has become part of the school's habituation program, where students are encouraged to humble themselves spiritually before beginning academic activities.

Teachers also provide active guidance by demonstrating care and presence among students rather than remaining passive observers. During religious routines and learning activities, teachers continuously guide and supervise students while exemplifying good conduct. Furthermore, character education is implemented not

only through theoretical learning but also through direct practice, such as performing ablution, praying, and participating in community service simulations. Emotional approaches through discussion and reflection are also linked to students' daily experiences.

Conditioning is another important process in character education. First, the school creates a safe and Islamic ecosystem by designing an environment that supports character development through Islamic elements displayed throughout the school, including motivational posters and moral reminders. Islamic values are also reflected in daily interactions within classrooms, cafeterias, and other school spaces. Furthermore, the school applies a strict disciplinary framework accompanied by clear and measurable consequences for violations, including improper uniforms and other misconduct. These measures encompass physical, social, behavioral, and digital conditioning, as stated in the official document of the *Majelis Dikdasmen PP Muhammadiyah* (2021).

Second, digital integrity and self-control are strengthened through the creation of an Islamic learning environment. Students are prohibited from bringing gadgets to school in order to maintain a conducive learning atmosphere. Religious activities such as congregational prayer and Qur'an recitation are believed to foster students' self-discipline and time-management skills. According to Faruq (2020), digital integrity is necessary to prevent students from losing their sense of identity amid the overwhelming flow of information. Likewise, Akhmad (2020) state that religious practices and an Islamic school environment empirically contribute to improving students' self-control, particularly in limiting excessive gadget use.

Third, social conditioning is developed through ethical behavior and hospitality. Students are encouraged to behave politely and respectfully toward peers, teachers, and school visitors as part of the 4S culture. Although some students still appear rigid in practicing friendliness and hospitality, the school continues to strengthen students' social intelligence.

Fourth, emotional and reflective approaches are fostered through discussions, videos, inspirational stories, and reflective learning activities. According to one Islamic Education (*PAI*) teacher, this strategy helps students understand the meaning behind moral values so that they can consciously internalize and practice them in daily life. Another teacher explained that character values are strengthened not through lecturing alone but through gradual habituation linked to real-life situations encountered by students.

Fifth, values are contextualized within students' daily experiences. Teachers consistently connect learning materials with real-life examples relevant to students' social realities. This process facilitates the internalization of character values because students can directly relate religious teachings to everyday life. Observations at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam indicate that the school has successfully established a religious and welcoming environment, where students greet guests politely and respectfully. Nevertheless, challenges remain in strengthening students' confidence and friendliness in social interactions.

Sixth, the school fosters synergy between the school and families through parental involvement programs, including meetings and collaborative activities. These efforts strengthen parental trust and support the sustainability of school programs. Since harmony between school and family directly affects students' growth and development, the school actively encourages families to reinforce positive habits developed in the classroom within the home environment.

3) The Impact of Character Education Strategies

First, the shaping of student behavior. Character education through habit-forming programs has a systemic impact that transforms student behavior from mere compliance into conscious action. Students demonstrate the importance of religious observance, good conduct, and noble character, as reflected in their commitment to modesty and appropriate social behavior, although these attitudes are not yet consistently demonstrated by all students.

Second, the learning environment and academic quality. A humanistic relationship between teachers and students fosters strong character development and psychological safety. Meaningful learning is also integrated into extracurricular activities. In this context, students show high enthusiasm because learning is no longer perceived as abstract knowledge but as something that provides tangible benefits. Activities such as cooking practice and spiritual retreats encourage students to become more enthusiastic and to view academic challenges as opportunities for growth and experience rather than as burdens.

Third, the synergy between school and family. Through parental involvement, one of the most visible impacts is the emergence of strong parental trust as families begin to witness authentic changes in their children. Parents are no longer merely supervisors but become direct witnesses to the development of independent Islamic character in their children, such as performing religious duties consistently, maintaining good behavior, and helping with household responsibilities voluntarily without being instructed. These natural behavioral

changes demonstrate that education does not merely leave an impression within the school environment but becomes internalized as part of students' identities. When families observe the tangible outcomes of this character formation, a healthy educational ecosystem is created in which parental trust serves as additional support for schools in continuing to produce pious and integrity-driven generations. This condition contributes to the sustainability of character education programs. However, field observations indicate that parental awareness and participation in character development at home still need to be strengthened, considering that the family environment serves as the primary foundation for character formation.

Fourth, long-term outcomes. Graduates are expected to develop a strong sense of identity and self-confidence. Through extracurricular activities such as *Tapak Suci*, scouting, leadership classes, and other training programs, character education fosters leadership qualities and public speaking skills among students. Participation in public preaching activities demonstrates that Islamic character has developed into an essential life skill, particularly in communication and leadership. Furthermore, students' increasing self-confidence emerges from the sense of security and support they experience during the educational process. Graduates demonstrate mental readiness to pursue higher education, develop aspirations for the future, and cultivate interests in specific fields. According to students, they are particularly enthusiastic about sports-related extracurricular activities such as futsal and *Tapak Suci*. This finding indicates that the program is capable of shaping resilient, adaptive, and future-oriented character among students.

B. Discussion

The objectives and strategies of character education are clearly embedded within the Muhammadiyah curriculum framework to produce students who are not only cognitively competent but also capable of implementing Islamic values in their daily lives and demonstrating strong Islamic character. This is reflected in the positive behavioral changes experienced by students, including improved discipline, moral conduct, and religious awareness. However, despite these positive outcomes, the implementation of character education still faces several challenges and gaps that must be addressed collaboratively by schools and other stakeholders. These challenges remain one of the factors preventing schools from consistently producing graduates of equally high quality in practice.

Therefore, continuous evaluation, development, and more systematic character-building efforts are necessary. Schools need to consistently reinforce students' understanding of Islamic character values in order to prevent misunderstandings that may influence inappropriate behavior, since flawed understanding often leads to flawed actions. In this regard, schools must enforce rules firmly while maintaining humane approaches in applying disciplinary consequences. At the same time, schools should consistently appreciate and recognize students' achievements so that students understand the importance of responsibility, discipline, and positive recognition.

In addition, schools need to ensure the continuous availability of adequate facilities and infrastructure that support character development. Islamic-themed materials, including motivational posters, moral reminders, and Islamic guidelines displayed throughout the school environment—including classrooms, hallways, restrooms, and cafeterias—help students remain connected to Islamic values wherever they are within the school setting. This effort forms part of creating a comfortable and value-oriented educational environment. Comfort and environmental support are important elements in shaping Islamic character and are closely related to the conditioning aspect within the three-pillar strategy of character education.

Consistency in implementing character education programs is also essential so that their impact can be clearly observed. The consistent implementation of the ISMUBA curriculum contributes not only to improving students' discipline and honesty as dimensions of religious character but also to strengthening social empathy and promoting deeper and more holistic academic understanding (Faturrahman, 2024; Mawardah, 2025). These findings indicate that Islamic-based character education can positively influence both students' moral development and their academic growth when implemented consistently and comprehensively.

Furthermore, the Muhammadiyah curriculum must maintain its independence and integrity without compromising its foundational Islamic principles. The curriculum should remain free from external influences that are inconsistent with Islamic values or with the educational philosophy of Muhammadiyah, which emphasizes the formation of faithful, God-fearing, and morally upright individuals. The religious identity and exclusivity of the Muhammadiyah curriculum must therefore be preserved, along with the quality and consistency of every educational program and institutional system developed within the curriculum framework.

This issue becomes particularly important when schools integrate supplementary curricula or external educational systems. Schools must ensure that additional curricula, textbooks, and educational concepts do not

contradict or weaken the integrity of the primary curriculum, which is fundamentally based on Islamic teachings. Failure to maintain this alignment may hinder the effectiveness of character education and reduce the school's ability to produce morally grounded graduates. Since students' behavior is strongly influenced by the knowledge, values, and experiences they receive throughout the educational process, educational institutions must exercise caution and selectivity in determining the learning materials and educational approaches delivered to students.

4. CONCLUSION

The implementation of character education through role modeling, habituation, and environmental conditioning at SMP Muhammadiyah 16 Lubuk Pakam has shaped students to become polite, courteous, independent, and equipped with leadership qualities and *da'wah* abilities. Through the strengthening of extracurricular and religious programs, the school has successfully guided students toward developing an *ihsanul insan* identity that balances cognitive intelligence with righteous deeds and moral values.

Although positive impacts are evident in changes in students' religious behavior and mental readiness, these achievements have not yet consistently resulted in uniformly outstanding graduates. This condition is influenced by several inhibiting factors originating from the family environment, social surroundings, individual student characteristics, and challenges related to the internal implementation of the curriculum. Therefore, strengthening character education strategies remains necessary through the consistent implementation of programs, preserving the integrity of the curriculum's Islamic identity from external influences that are not aligned with Muhammadiyah values, and optimizing conditioning strategies through the provision of facilities and infrastructure with strong Islamic characteristics.

Ultimately, harmonious synergy among the school, family, and the surrounding environment serves as the key factor in ensuring that the internalization of character values becomes deeply rooted within students and remains resilient against negative external influences.

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