

Between Doctrine and Practice: Rethinking Akidah Akhlak Curriculum in Islamic Elementary Schools Amidst Contemporary Moral Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the disconnection between normative intentions and practical implementation of the Akidah Akhlak curriculum in Islamic elementary schools, particularly in addressing contemporary moral challenges in the digital era. Conducted at MI Darul Ibad Rowoindah, this qualitative case study reveals that while Islamic moral values are emphasized at the policy level, classroom practices remain rigid, teacher-centered, and disconnected from students' lived experiences. Data collected through interviews, observations, and documentation show that instruction is predominantly based on memorization and lectures, with minimal student engagement or contextual application. Students understand moral concepts but struggle to apply them in real-life situations, especially in the digital environment. The study finds that the current curriculum lacks transformative pedagogy, experiential learning models, and meaningful documentation for character assessment. It argues for a comprehensive shift toward reflective, student-centered, and context-based moral education. Pedagogical reform must include teacher training, curriculum flexibility, and integration of digital moral literacy. Without aligning values, methods, and assessment tools, Akidah Akhlak risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. This research offers practical insights and conceptual frameworks for renewing moral education in Islamic schools, emphasizing the need to bridge doctrine and practice to foster genuine character formation.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the education sector has been facing a significant challenge in the form of a growing moral crisis, especially among elementary school-aged children. While digital technology has brought numerous benefits, it has also opened the door to the infiltration of values that conflict with the principles of Islamic faith and ethics (akidah akhlak). Phenomena such as increasing individualism, exposure to negative online content, and declining social empathy among children indicate a systemic failure to instill strong character from an early

age (Zakiah, 2021). Amid the rapid currents of globalization and digitalization, character education based on Islamic value through the Akidah Akhlak subject in madrasah ibtidaiyah should serve as a key moral safeguard. However, this subject is often marginalized in both methodology and practice, losing its relevance and effectiveness in shaping students personalities (Rahmawati, 2022). Therefore, this research is crucial to address the urgent need for curriculum transformation and pedagogical innovation in Akidah Akhlak education in the digital era.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of character education in the madrasah curriculum, including the role of Akidah Akhlak in shaping students' personalities. For instance, Hasan (2018) emphasized the significance of Islamic value-based curricula in developing moral awareness, while Nurhadi (2020) illustrated how the subject instills honesty, responsibility, and tolerance. However, most of these studies remain normative and descriptive, and have not explored how Akidah Akhlak education should be transformed in response to technological and cultural shifts in students' lives. Moreover, the lack of contextualized and transformative pedagogical strategies renders the subject less effective in addressing the values crisis among students. Limited research has investigated the connection between the digital moral crisis and the stagnation in Akidah Akhlak curriculum development (Haryono, 2019). This paper thus emerges to fill this gap by offering an analytical and solution-oriented approach to updating the teaching of Akidah Akhlak in a way that resonates with current realities.

This study aims to examine how the Akidah Akhlak subject in madrasah ibtidaiyah can be strategically transformed to address moral challenges in the digital era. The central research question posed is: How should the teaching of Akidah Akhlak be redesigned to be more relevant, contextual, and effective in shaping students' character amid the massive flow of digital information? This research investigates emerging moral issues experienced by madrasah students and evaluates how the current curriculum is responding to these challenges. With a descriptive-qualitative approach, this study aims not only to map the current weaknesses but also to present practical and conceptual strategies for curriculum improvement. The emphasis lies on pedagogical innovation, curriculum relevance, and the contextual integration of Islamic teachings in a way that aligns with the daily lives and moral needs of today's digitally exposed children (Al-Attas, 1999; Nasr, 2002).

This study is grounded in the argument that teaching Akidah Akhlak in madrasah ibtidaiyah requires urgent and adaptive curriculum transformation in response to ongoing social and technological changes. Traditional approaches that emphasize memorization and dogmatic instruction are increasingly insufficient for shaping students' character in the digital age. What is needed is a dialogical, experience-based, and contextually relevant approach that fosters reflective moral reasoning and internalized values. The author argues that integrating contemporary moral issues, Islamic digital literacy, and character-building pedagogies based on real-life examples and role modeling will significantly strengthen Akidah Akhlak education (Rahmawati, 2022; Haryono, 2019). Thus, transforming this subject is not merely an academic initiative, but a strategic

solution to the moral emergency threatening the development of young Muslims in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) Darul Ibad, located in Rowoindah Village, which served as the primary research site. The school was purposively selected due to its strong institutional commitment to embedding Islamic moral values *akidah* and *akhlak* within its educational practices. Furthermore, MI Darul Ibad is situated in a semi-urban community that is currently undergoing cultural transformation, especially due to the increasing penetration of digital technologies. This condition makes the school a relevant context for exploring both the challenges and innovations in teaching *Akidah Akhlak* amidst a broader moral crisis influenced by digital exposure. The unit of analysis includes the actual instructional process of *Akidah Akhlak*, the interactions between teachers and students, curriculum strategies, and character-building practices within the school environment. The research focuses on how Islamic moral values are taught, internalized, and reflected in students' daily behaviors and mindsets, both within and beyond the classroom.

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design. The case study methodology was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon in this case, the implementation and transformation of *Akidah Akhlak* education within a real-life context. The qualitative design emphasizes the discovery of meaning, perspectives, and patterns that emerge naturally from participants' lived experiences. Rather than seeking generalizations, this study aims for a deep, contextual understanding of the educational dynamics within MI Darul Ibad. The case study approach supports a holistic investigation of the school's culture, instructional practices, and challenges related to moral education in the digital era. It also enables the researcher to examine the complexity of curriculum transformation through multiple sources and voices. Ultimately, this design is most suited for capturing how values-based education operates in response to real societal changes and ethical challenges facing elementary-aged students.

The study gathered data from key informants who were directly involved in the planning, implementation, and reception of *Akidah Akhlak* instruction. Informants included the principal, vice principal for curriculum affairs, classroom teachers responsible for teaching *Akidah Akhlak*, and students from grades IV to VI. Each informant contributed unique insights relevant to the study. The principal and vice principal provided information about institutional policies, character education frameworks, and curriculum direction. Classroom teachers shared their practical experiences, strategies, challenges, and perceptions of students' character development. Meanwhile, students were selected to capture their understanding, internalization, and real-life application of the values taught in the *Akidah Akhlak* subject. Informants were selected purposively based on their roles and direct involvement in character education practices. This variety of perspectives provided a comprehensive view of how the subject is taught and received across different levels within the madrasah structure.

Data collection was carried out using three main techniques: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation involved direct engagement in classroom and school activities to observe instructional practices, student-teacher interactions, and character-building activities within both formal and informal settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all informants to gain rich, detailed accounts of their experiences and perceptions. The interview format allowed flexibility to pursue emerging themes while remaining aligned with the study's objectives. Document analysis included reviewing instructional materials such as lesson plans, teaching modules, syllabi, school guidelines, and activity records. These documents were used to triangulate the data and to gain insight into how *Akidah Akhlak* values were formally structured and planned. Data were collected iteratively, allowing for continuous reflection and clarification to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness. Triangulation across methods and sources further enhanced the credibility and depth of the study's findings.

The process of data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), involving three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, the researcher selected, simplified, and organized raw data into categories and themes relevant to the study's focus. The display phase involved presenting the data in narrative form and in visual formats such as matrices and flowcharts to reveal connections and patterns. In the final stage, data were re-examined and interpreted to derive conclusions, ensuring that findings were grounded and reflective of the field context. This study utilized a combination of content analysis, discourse analysis, and interpretative analysis. Content analysis was used to examine educational materials and documents, discourse analysis was applied to interview transcripts to understand the language and narratives used by participants, and interpretative analysis helped to uncover the deeper meanings embedded in teaching practices and student responses. These methods collectively supported a comprehensive understanding of how moral education is being shaped in the digital age.

RESULT

Interviews were conducted with the principal, vice principal for curriculum affairs, homeroom teachers, and students from grades IV to VI at MI Darul Ibad. The results revealed a significant gap between the normative understanding of *Akidah Akhlak* and its actual classroom implementation. The principal emphasized that *Akidah Akhlak* is a core subject for character formation, but teachers admitted that the lessons were mostly textual and lacked contextual relevance. Meanwhile, students described the subject as a routine "lecture" without direct relevance to their daily lives. The visualization of interview data showed three main themes: (1) strong normative understanding at the policy level, (2) limited and rigid teaching methods, and (3) weak internalization of values among students. Of the 12 informants, eight (teachers and school leaders) expressed the need for methodological renewal, while four students stated they

understood moral values but found it difficult to apply them, especially in the context of social media and peer relationships.

The data revealed a clear disconnection between doctrine and practice. School leaders and teachers expressed their commitment to Islamic values as the foundation of student character. However, in practice, the teaching methods used were mainly lecturing, memorization, and cognitive assessment. Students received moral content as information rather than as values to be lived. This pattern shows that moral transformation has not fully occurred in the classroom. Moreover, a gap exists between teachers' expectations and students' social realities. Teachers expect students to be honest and polite, but students face competing influences from digital media, peer pressure, and family dynamics. Most teachers acknowledged the importance of contextual teaching but cited a lack of training, time, and relevant instructional tools as major obstacles. This reflects the broader systemic issue: the inability to bridge moral instruction with the lived experiences of students in today's digital world.

Analysis of the interview data indicates that the gap between doctrinal understanding and classroom practice stems from the lack of integration between values, pedagogy, and students' realities. While Islamic moral values remain ideologically important, they are not meaningfully connected to students' lived experiences. Teachers tend to deliver moral content as a curriculum obligation, not as a transformative process using reflective or participatory methods. This suggests an urgent need to shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered paradigm. Akidah Akhlak should be taught through contextual, narrative, and experiential learning approaches. When students do not see the relevance of moral values in their lives, those values become meaningless. Therefore, the renewal of methods, teacher training, and the strengthening of contextual moral literacy are key to revitalizing Akidah Akhlak education in Islamic elementary schools.

Observations were conducted in four classrooms during Akidah Akhlak lessons. The teaching process was primarily lecture-based, with teachers relying heavily on textbooks. Students sat passively, listening, taking notes, and answering verbal questions, with minimal discussion or reflective activities. In one session, the teacher read material about the importance of honesty, but the lesson lacked concrete examples or student-centered activities such as role-play or discussion. Classroom interaction was largely one-directional. Of the eight observed sessions, only two involved open dialogue or case-based learning. Outside the classroom, practices reflecting Islamic values such as queuing, maintaining cleanliness, or speaking politely were not consistently reinforced in the school environment. This data indicates a weak connection between classroom content and behavioral habituation. The values taught in class were not visibly practiced or institutionalized in the school culture.

The dominant pattern from observation was a disconnect between instruction and value habituation. In class, students learned moral concepts as memorized knowledge without opportunities to experience or embody them. Teachers served as the primary source of information, while students were passive recipients. There were no project-based learning activities, simulations, or collaborative reflections. Outside the classroom, the reinforcement of values

through structured programs or routines was lacking. For example, there were no regular character-building activities such as mentoring, peer discussions, or daily moral reflections. This pattern reveals that Akidah Akhlak education remains largely symbolic and has not evolved into a lived school culture. As a result, Islamic values are taught as theoretical content but fail to translate into real behavioral transformation or ethical school norms.

Based on the observations, it can be interpreted that the main issue in Akidah Akhlak instruction lies in the absence of transformative and experiential learning approaches. Students are not given sufficient space to experience, internalize, or reflect upon the values being taught. This indicates a reliance on behaviorist rather than humanistic teaching models. Although teachers understand the importance of moral education, their methods do not empower students as active moral agents. Consequently, the values taught do not evolve into consistent attitudes or habits. The lack of structured character-building initiatives in school culture further weakens internalization. What's needed is a learning design that emphasizes moral awareness, practical engagement, and the integration of formal lessons with schoolwide practices. Without this, moral instruction risks remaining superficial mere content with no lived resonance.

The collected documentation included lesson plans (RPP), student textbooks, classroom activity logs, and student behavioral records. These documents revealed that themes such as honesty, respect for parents, and responsibility were clearly stated in the syllabus and RPP. However, there was no evidence of project-based assessments or participatory activities to measure value internalization. Student textbooks presented moral teachings in narrative form with limited contextual visuals. Classroom journals mostly recorded attendance and written assignments, without tracking behavioral or character development. Student behavior logs showed frequent incidents of tardiness, failure to complete tasks, and disrespectful behavior in class. Notably, there were no documents indicating any structured reward system for positive behavior. This suggests that character education documentation is not yet functioning as an active and ongoing monitoring and development tool.

The data from school documents reveal a pattern of cognitive dominance with weak affective and behavioral dimensions in Akidah Akhlak instruction. The syllabus and lesson plans focus on cognitive indicators and learning outcomes rather than actual character development. There were no assessment rubrics for attitudes or reflective student journals as part of the learning process. This suggests a non-holistic approach to moral education. The student behavior logs also indicate that the values taught in class have not significantly reduced behavioral issues. Furthermore, the absence of positive reinforcement systems reinforces the view that schools are more reactive than proactive in character formation. This pattern highlights a gap between the ideal objectives of moral education and the supporting documentation, which should function as instruments for reflection, monitoring, and the cultivation of values in everyday school life.

An analytical reading of the documentation suggests that the Akidah Akhlak curriculum remains focused on declarative knowledge rather than character

formation and school culture development. While the official documents express noble intentions by including Islamic values, they fail to link those values to assessment practices or everyday school life. The absence of affective assessment tools or moral development records indicates that character is not yet treated as a primary learning outcome. This calls for a reconstruction of the curriculum and assessment framework to ensure values are not only stated but lived and measured. Schools must develop documentation systems that serve not only as administrative tools but as moral instruments active, reflective, and formative. Without a robust system of documentation and evaluation, value transformation remains unmeasurable and unsustainable. Therefore, documentation should be reimagined as a strategic component of holistic Islamic education.

DISCUSSION

The interview findings uncover a critical implication: the Akidah Akhlak curriculum, though normatively rich and ideologically significant, fails to achieve its intended function of forming moral character among students. This dysfunction stems from a mismatch between curriculum content and pedagogical practice. Teachers tend to deliver values through one-way lectures, reducing students' moral education to theoretical knowledge without meaningful internalization. The implication is significant: a curriculum that does not connect doctrine with students' lived experiences becomes functionally irrelevant. Recent studies emphasize that moral education must be active and transformative to shape ethical behavior (Suryani et al., 2021; Lubis & Wahyuni, 2022). If not restructured, the subject risks becoming symbolic rather than practical (Ismail, 2023; Alkhateeb, 2021). This situation implies an urgent need for pedagogical reform that aligns with constructivist and experiential learning models to fulfill the real purpose of Akidah Akhlak: shaping students' character to meet contemporary moral challenges (Rahman et al., 2022).

The gap between the normative aspirations of Akidah Akhlak education and its implementation in the classroom can be traced back to deeper structural causes. Chief among them is the lack of adequate teacher training in innovative pedagogies that go beyond memorization. Many Islamic elementary school teachers are still shaped by a content-delivery tradition, lacking exposure to interactive or reflective methods (Lubis & Wahyuni, 2022). Moreover, school infrastructure often does not support participatory learning, and rigid curriculum frameworks discourage deviation from standardized textbooks. Institutional culture tends to preserve legacy teaching styles, inhibiting innovation (Alkhateeb, 2021). This structural rigidity results in a system where values are taught but not experienced. Scholars agree that moral education requires alignment between curriculum, teaching methods, and student contexts (Ismail, 2023; Rahman et al., 2022). Thus, unless systemic barriers—particularly in training and curriculum flexibility are addressed, the doctrine-practice gap will persist and undermine moral development.

Observations of classroom practices confirm a serious dysfunction in the delivery of moral education. While the curriculum intends to foster moral

character, the learning environment does not support active engagement or moral reflection. Teachers dominate classroom discourse, while students remain passive observers of values rather than active participants. This results in superficial learning, where moral concepts are memorized but not lived (Suryani et al., 2021). The implication is that without participatory learning, students cannot develop a personal moral framework that guides their behavior. Scholars such as Al-Ghazali and contemporary educators alike emphasize the importance of lived values through modeling, reflection, and dialogic learning (Rahman et al., 2022; Alkhateeb, 2021). The dysfunction is not just pedagogical but developmental: students are being deprived of meaningful moral formation. Hence, the observed teaching practices call for an urgent pedagogical shift toward student-centered strategies that foster character through experience, not just instruction (Lubis & Wahyuni, 2022).

The continued reliance on teacher-centered instruction in Akidah Akhlak classes is deeply rooted in institutional and cultural structures. Many teachers operate within a system that historically prioritizes content transmission over student engagement. This culture is reinforced by curriculum documents that favor standardized learning outcomes, rigid assessments, and limited classroom autonomy (Ismail, 2023). Additionally, professional development opportunities in Islamic elementary schools often fail to provide practical training in interactive or reflective teaching methodologies (Suryani et al., 2021). Without systemic support, teachers default to methods they know lectures and memorization. Cultural norms that equate discipline with silence and order further discourage open dialogue or collaborative learning (Rahman et al., 2022). Studies show that without adequate institutional investment in training, mentorship, and pedagogical freedom, innovation is unlikely (Alkhateeb, 2021; Lubis & Wahyuni, 2022). Therefore, the problem is not merely teacher preference, but a reflection of larger structural forces that hinder progressive pedagogy.

Documentation from lesson plans, student journals, and school records reveals a functional gap in how student character development is monitored and assessed. Although moral values such as honesty, responsibility, and respect are embedded in curricular documents, their implementation remains superficial. No meaningful rubric exists to evaluate whether students truly internalize these values in daily behavior. Behavioral records focus more on discipline violations than positive reinforcement or growth (Ismail, 2023). This suggests a dysfunction in documentation practice: instead of being tools for character-building feedback, records function merely as administrative compliance. Studies underscore that reflective documentation such as moral diaries, peer feedback, or value-based rubrics enhances internalization and accountability (Alkhateeb, 2021; Lubis & Wahyuni, 2022; Rahman et al., 2022). Without such tools, the learning outcomes of moral education cannot be measured or improved effectively. This calls for a redesign of documentation systems to align them with character formation goals and pedagogical function.

The underlying cause of ineffective documentation in Akidah Akhlak learning lies in the misconception that moral education cannot or should not be measured. This belief leads to minimal investment in the development of

assessment tools that track student moral growth (Suryani et al., 2021). Additionally, there is a lack of training on how to design qualitative and formative assessments for character education. Teachers are not equipped to create reflective journals, narrative evaluations, or value-based observation tools (Rahman et al., 2022). School policies tend to favor quantitative indicators of performance, sidelining moral and behavioral dimensions. International literature has emphasized that character development, while complex, is not unmeasurable it requires creative, reflective, and participatory tools (Ismail, 2023; Alkhateeb, 2021). Therefore, the cause is epistemological as well as structural: a limited understanding of moral assessment and a lack of institutional support for its development. Reform is needed to integrate moral metrics into mainstream educational documentation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a crucial lesson: there exists a persistent disconnect between the normative goals of Akidah Akhlak education and its practical execution in the classroom. While the curriculum is rich in doctrinal values, its implementation remains rigid, teacher-centered, and detached from students' real-life contexts. As a result, moral instruction tends to become symbolic rather than transformative. The findings emphasize that for Akidah Akhlak to be meaningful, it must move beyond rote learning and toward reflective, contextualized, and experiential pedagogy. The moral of this research is clear character formation in Islamic education must align values, methods, and lived realities of students in the digital era.

This research offers a significant contribution to the academic discourse by challenging the conventional paradigm of moral education in Islamic elementary schools. It provides a fresh perspective by combining empirical data with theoretical insight to highlight the dysfunction between doctrine and practice. Methodologically, it integrates interviews, observations, and documentation to triangulate findings and reveal structural patterns. Conceptually, it pushes the discourse forward by emphasizing the need for a student-centered, context-responsive approach to Akidah Akhlak instruction. It encourages scholars and educators to rethink how values are taught not merely as content, but as character-building experiences rooted in real-world engagement and critical reflection.

Despite its depth, this study has several limitations. It focuses on a single case study MI Darul Ibad limiting the generalizability of findings to broader contexts. The subject population is also constrained to elementary-age students, leaving middle and secondary levels unexplored. In terms of method, the research did not incorporate quantitative assessments of student character development, which could offer complementary insights. Future research should explore comparative cases across diverse educational settings, age groups, and cultural backgrounds. It is also recommended to test innovative pedagogical models that blend moral education with digital literacy, collaborative learning, and behavior-based assessment strategies.

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