

Hidden Curriculum as Normative Organizational Control: A Qualitative Exploratory Study of Character Formation in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School

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ABSTRACT. Research on character education in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) has largely focused on formal curricula, while the interaction between hidden curriculum processes and organizational culture remains insufficiently examined. Addressing this gap, this study investigates how organizational culture and the hidden curriculum jointly shape students' character at Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, Martapura, South Kalimantan, Indonesia. A qualitative case-study design was employed, using participatory observation, in-depth interviews with the *kyai*, teachers, and students, and document analysis. Data were analyzed through interactive thematic procedures involving data condensation, display, and verification. The findings indicate that two interconnected mechanisms primarily drive character formation. First, the hidden curriculum operates through normative control systems embedded in daily routines, disciplinary practices, and *pesantren* traditions, which continuously regulate and internalize expected behaviors. Second, the charismatic leadership of the *kyai* serves as a cultural mediator, reinforcing moral values through exemplary conduct, symbolic authority, and relational influence. These mechanisms foster the organic development of *akhlakul karimah*, including discipline, responsibility, obedience, and respect for teachers. This study contributes to theory by proposing an integrated perspective that links the hidden curriculum and organizational culture as mutually reinforcing dimensions of character education in Islamic educational institutions. In practice, the findings offer implications for the design of culturally grounded, value-oriented character education models that can inform educational policy and leadership practices in *pesantren* and other faith-based educational settings.

Keywords: *Character Education; Hidden Curriculum; Islamic Boarding Schools; Moral Development; Organizational Culture.*

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has re-emerged as one of the most pressing priorities in contemporary education, driven by growing international concerns over ethical decline, social polarization, cyberbullying, academic dishonesty, and the weakening of civic responsibility among young people in increasingly digitalized societies (Herlina et al., 2024; Nucci & Narvaez, 2014; Smith, 2013; Snelbecker, 2013). While educational systems have achieved substantial progress in expanding access to knowledge and developing cognitive competencies, many have struggled to cultivate students' moral judgment, ethical reasoning, and socially responsible behavior in ways that remain meaningful within rapidly changing social contexts (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Grey, 2025; Lee et al., 2024; Nucci

& Turiel, 2009). Consequently, scholars increasingly argue that educational quality should be evaluated not solely by academic achievement but also by the extent to which educational institutions nurture integrity, empathy, responsibility, and character as essential dimensions of sustainable human development (Nucci & Turiel, 2009).

This concern has generated an important international debate regarding how character is actually developed within educational institutions. While traditional approaches emphasize formal curricula, explicit moral instruction, and citizenship education, an expanding body of research suggests that students acquire moral values more profoundly through everyday institutional experiences than through classroom instruction alone (Biesta, 2021; Davidson et al., 2014). Daily interactions with teachers, organizational routines, institutional rituals, leadership practices, peer relationships, and school norms often communicate implicit values that substantially influence students' character formation. Consequently, researchers increasingly recognize that educational institutions function not merely as instructional organizations but as moral communities in which character is continuously constructed through both formal and informal educational processes.

Within this perspective, organizational culture has emerged as a critical yet frequently underexplored foundation for understanding character education (Ruohomaa et al., 2025; Tzianakopoulou & Manesis, 2018). Organizational culture extends beyond administrative arrangements or institutional identity; it encompasses the shared assumptions, collective beliefs, behavioral norms, symbolic practices, and everyday routines that shape how members of an educational community interpret and enact organizational values (Kim et al., 2024; Kiyik Kicir & Altunoglu, 2024). As proposed by organizational culture theory, values become institutionalized not primarily through written policies but through repeated social practices, leadership behaviors, communal expectations, and organizational traditions that gradually define acceptable patterns of conduct (Schein, 2010). Accordingly, character formation should be understood not only as an instructional outcome but also as a cultural process embedded within the organizational life of educational institutions.

The growing emphasis on organizational culture has also revitalized scholarly interest in the concept of the hidden curriculum (Brown et al., 2020; Doja et al., 2018; Sarikhani et al., 2020). Originally introduced to explain the implicit transmission of social norms beyond formal curricula, the hidden curriculum refers to the values, attitudes, dispositions, and behavioral expectations communicated through institutional structures, interpersonal relationships, disciplinary systems, and everyday educational experiences rather than through officially prescribed learning objectives (Öztok, 2019). Rather than functioning as an incidental by-product of schooling, the hidden curriculum increasingly is viewed as one of the principal mechanisms through which educational institutions shape students' moral identities and social behavior.

Despite its widespread acceptance, however, the hidden curriculum remains theoretically contested. Critical educational theorists conceptualize it primarily as a mechanism of social reproduction that unconsciously perpetuates existing power relations, ideological dominance, and institutional inequalities (Apple, 2018; Giroux & Penna, 1979; Kimelberg & Brass, 2026; Wright & Froehlich, 2012). In contrast, contemporary perspectives argue that the hidden curriculum can also function as a constructive pedagogical resource that intentionally promotes ethical awareness, moral agency, and value internalization when embedded within educational cultures characterized by shared moral commitments and participatory learning environments (Biesta, 2021; Cuypers, 2021; Ullah et al., 2025). This theoretical divergence raises an important question: whether implicit educational processes inevitably reproduce institutional power or may instead become transformative mechanisms for character development under particular organizational conditions.

This debate becomes especially significant within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), which represent one of the world's oldest and most enduring forms of faith-based residential education. Unlike many formal educational institutions, *pesantren* integrate religious instruction, communal

living, spiritual discipline, leadership exemplification, and continuous social interaction into a holistic educational ecosystem. Character values such as sincerity (*ikhlas*), discipline, humility (*tawadhu'*), responsibility, mutual respect, and social solidarity are not transmitted exclusively through classroom learning but are continuously practiced within everyday communal life under the guidance of religious leaders (*kyai*) and senior students (Anam et al., 2019; Ismail, 2016; Komalasari & Yakubu, 2023; Lukens-Bull, 2013). Consequently, *pesantren* provide a distinctive educational environment in which organizational culture and hidden curriculum are deeply intertwined rather than operating as separate educational domains.

Nevertheless, existing scholarship has not adequately explained this relationship. First, from a theoretical perspective, previous studies predominantly conceptualize the hidden curriculum as an implicit pedagogical phenomenon while paying insufficient attention to its embeddedness within organizational culture, a broader institutional system of value production. Second, methodologically, much of the available literature relies on descriptive analyses of religious instruction or curriculum implementation, with relatively few studies employing in-depth qualitative inquiry to capture how organizational culture is experienced and interpreted by students in everyday institutional life. Third, in the context of international research on the hidden curriculum, studies have largely focused on secular schools or higher education institutions, whereas empirical evidence from Indonesian *pesantren*, particularly those located outside Java's major educational centers, remains limited. Finally, analytically, organizational culture and the hidden curriculum are generally examined as independent constructs, leading to a limited understanding of how their interaction collectively shapes students' character development.

Addressing these gaps, this study advances a different conceptual perspective by positioning the hidden curriculum not as a peripheral educational phenomenon but as an intrinsic manifestation of organizational culture operating through symbolic leadership, institutional traditions, communal norms, religious rituals, and everyday social practices. We argue that organizational culture constitutes the institutional infrastructure through which the hidden curriculum continuously mediates the internalization of character values among students. From this perspective, character formation is understood as a dynamic cultural process emerging through sustained participation in organizational life rather than as a direct outcome of formal moral instruction alone.

Based on this conceptual framework, the present study investigates how organizational culture operates within Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Martapura and explores the mechanisms by which its hidden curriculum contributes to students' character formation. By integrating organizational culture theory with hidden curriculum scholarship in the context of Islamic education, this research extends existing theoretical discussions on value transmission in educational organizations. Furthermore, the study offers practical insights for designing culturally grounded and sustainable models of character education that may inform educational policy and institutional development within Islamic and other values-based educational settings.

METHOD

Research Design

This study was situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is socially constructed through participants' meanings, interactions, and lived experiences. This perspective is particularly appropriate for examining the implicit educational processes through which organizational culture and the hidden curriculum shape students' character within the socio-religious environment of an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*). Guided by this paradigm, the study employed a single-case qualitative design to generate an in-depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context.

Darussalam Islamic Boarding School in Martapura, South Kalimantan, was selected as a revelatory case because of its long-established organizational culture and its sustained emphasis on character education through both formal and informal educational practices. The case was bounded institutionally (one *pesantren*), geographically (South Kalimantan, Indonesia), and contextually (character education embedded in everyday organizational life), enabling a comprehensive examination of the interaction between organizational culture and the hidden curriculum.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases that could provide diverse perspectives on organizational culture and character formation. Selection criteria included active involvement in the *pesantren* community, direct engagement in educational activities, and substantial institutional experience. Teachers and administrators were required to have served within the institution for at least three years, while students were selected based on their active participation in *pesantren* life.

Fifteen participants participated in the study, comprising two *kyai* (Islamic boarding school leaders), two foundation administrators, five teachers (*ustadz*), and six students (*santri*). Recruitment began after formal institutional approval was obtained, followed by voluntary participation with informed consent. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the recurrence of conceptual patterns and the absence of substantially new insights across successive interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected over approximately three months using multiple qualitative methods to facilitate methodological triangulation. Participant observation constituted the primary data source. The researcher adopted an observer-as-participant role, participating in routine educational and religious activities while maintaining sufficient analytical distance. Observations focused on everyday interactions, disciplinary practices, ritual activities, leadership behaviors, and informal learning processes that reflected the operation of the hidden curriculum. Detailed field notes were recorded immediately following each observation session.

Semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with all participants to explore their experiences and interpretations of organizational culture, hidden curriculum practices, leadership, and character development. An interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions was developed based on the research objectives and relevant literature. Individual interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim. To strengthen contextual understanding, documentary evidence—including institutional regulations, historical records, educational guidelines, student handbooks, and internal policy documents—was collected and analyzed. Documentary data were used primarily to corroborate observational and interview findings rather than as stand-alone evidence.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis following Braun et al.'s (2022) six-phase framework. Analysis commenced with repeated readings of interview transcripts, field notes, and institutional documents to become familiar with the dataset. Initial coding was conducted inductively, generating codes that reflected participants' experiences and observed organizational practices. Coding remained flexible throughout the analytical process, allowing meanings to evolve as interpretation deepened.

Codes were subsequently grouped into candidate themes through iterative comparison across multiple data sources. These themes were continuously reviewed, refined, and conceptually clarified to ensure internal coherence and meaningful distinctions between themes. Throughout this process,

constant comparison was undertaken across interviews, observations, and documentary evidence to identify convergent and divergent patterns. Although theme generation remained inductive, interpretation of the findings was informed by two complementary theoretical perspectives. Schein's (2010) organizational culture theory provided an analytical framework for interpreting the norms, values, and assumptions embedded within the *pesantren* environment, while the concept of the hidden curriculum (Apple, 2018) served as an interpretive lens for understanding the implicit processes of moral and character formation. These theoretical frameworks were applied during interpretation rather than predetermined coding, thereby preserving the inductive integrity of the analysis.

Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity

Methodological rigor was established based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged fieldwork, triangulation across interviews, observations, and institutional documents, and member checking with selected participants to verify the accuracy of emerging interpretations. Transferability was supported by in-depth descriptions of the *pesantren*, its organizational culture, and its educational practices, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

Dependability was ensured through a comprehensive audit trail documenting research decisions, interview protocols, coding development, analytical memos, and theme refinement. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memo writing and regular peer debriefing with qualitative research scholars, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in empirical evidence rather than personal assumptions. Recognizing that qualitative inquiry is inherently interpretive, the first author maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to critically examine how prior knowledge, disciplinary background in Islamic education, and researcher assumptions might influence data collection and interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

The study complied with established ethical principles governing qualitative research. Institutional permission was obtained before fieldwork commenced, and all participants received detailed information regarding the study's objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw without consequence at any stage of the research. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study to protect participants' identities, and all digital recordings, transcripts, and field notes were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Where applicable, the study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical approval procedures.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings suggest that student character formation (*akhlakul karimah*) is not primarily driven by formal teaching practices, but rather by an integrated hidden curriculum embedded in the organizational culture of Islamic boarding schools. Organizational culture serves as an overarching framework within which charismatic leadership, normative social control, temporal structuring based on Islamic values, and ongoing habituation interact to facilitate the internalization of moral values. These interrelated mechanisms collectively foster discipline, responsibility, respect, obedience, sincerity, and social solidarity, suggesting that character education in Islamic boarding schools is a culturally embedded, systemic process, rather than a discrete pedagogical intervention. A conceptual synthesis of this study's findings is depicted in Figure 1 below.

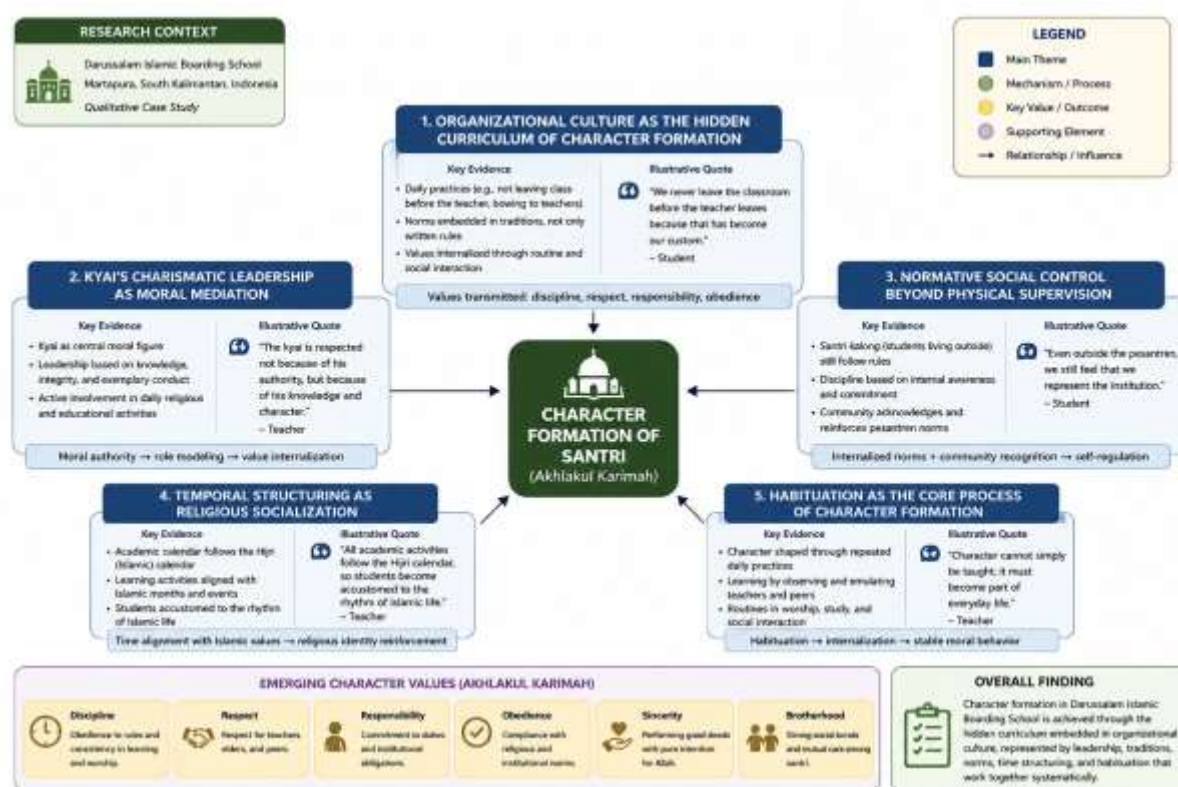


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Character Formation through Organizational Culture and the Hidden Curriculum in an Islamic Boarding School

Organizational Culture as the Hidden Curriculum of Character Formation

The findings indicate that organizational culture serves as the primary mechanism for implicitly transmitting character values within the *pesantren*. Rather than relying solely on formal instruction, moral values are embedded in everyday institutional routines, interpersonal interactions, and long-standing traditions that regulate students' behavior. Participant observation revealed that daily practices consistently reinforced expected patterns of conduct. Students routinely remained seated until the teacher left the classroom and lowered their heads when meeting teachers both inside and outside learning spaces. These practices were performed voluntarily and were widely perceived as expressions of respect rather than institutional obligations. One teacher explained: "Here, students are not only taught moral values, but they are accustomed to living those values every day, from the way they speak to the way they respect their teachers." Similarly, a student stated: "We never leave the classroom before the teacher leaves because that has become our custom." Document analysis further demonstrated that these behavioral expectations were embedded in institutional traditions rather than formal written regulations. The hidden curriculum, therefore, operated through repeated social practices that gradually normalized discipline, respect, and responsibility. Collectively, these findings suggest that organizational culture functions as an implicit educational system through which moral values become internalized as habitual behavior.

Kyai's Charismatic Leadership as Moral Mediation

Across all participant groups, the *kyai* emerged as the central figure in character formation. Leadership was perceived less as an administrative function than as a source of moral authority, exercised through personal example. Participants consistently emphasized that respect for the *kyai* originated from integrity, religious knowledge, and exemplary conduct rather than formal institutional position. One teacher noted: "The *kyai* is respected not because of his authority, but because of

his knowledge and character." Students similarly described how observing the *kyai's* daily behavior encouraged them to emulate his values. *"We see how the kyai lives simply and consistently worships, so we naturally want to follow him."* Observation data confirmed that the *kyai* remained actively involved in routine educational and religious activities, allowing students to experience moral leadership directly rather than symbolically. These findings indicate that moral authority serves as a central mechanism for reinforcing and legitimizing organizational values.

Normative Social Control Beyond Physical Supervision

A distinctive finding concerns the phenomenon of *santri kalong*—students who reside outside the *pesantren* but continue to comply with institutional norms. Although these students were not continuously supervised, observations showed that they consistently adhered to learning schedules, behavioral expectations, and religious routines. According to one administrator, *"Even though they do not stay in the dormitory, they still follow the pesantren rules with discipline."* Students likewise described discipline as a personal commitment rather than an externally imposed obligation. *"Even outside the pesantren, we still feel that we represent the institution."* Community members also contributed to reinforcing behavioral expectations by recognizing students as representatives of the *pesantren*. These findings suggest that discipline is sustained primarily through internalized normative awareness and community-based social control rather than direct surveillance.

Temporal Structuring as Religious Socialization

The findings further demonstrate that institutional time management contributes to students' religious character formation. Unlike conventional schools, Darussalam organizes academic activities according to the Islamic Hijri calendar. Learning schedules, academic milestones, and holiday periods are all synchronized with Islamic religious events. One teacher explained: *"All academic activities follow the Hijri calendar, so students become accustomed to the rhythm of Islamic life."* Students similarly reported becoming more familiar with Islamic months and religious commemorations because these shaped their educational experience. Observation confirmed that institutional routines consistently aligned educational activities with religious practices. These findings indicate that temporal organization itself becomes an implicit mechanism for continuously reinforcing Islamic identity.

Habituation as the Core Process of Character Formation

The final theme concerns the role of habituation in the development of *akhlakul karimah*. Participants consistently described character education as a process of repeated practice rather than explicit instruction. Moral values were embedded in routine interactions, classroom behavior, communal worship, and daily responsibilities. As one teacher explained, *"Character cannot simply be taught; it must become part of everyday life."* Students similarly emphasized learning appropriate behavior through observation and repeated practice. *"We learn how to behave from what our teachers do every day."* Observational evidence demonstrated that repeated participation in institutional routines gradually transformed expected behaviors into habitual practices. Overall, the findings indicate that character formation is achieved through continuous participation in the social and cultural life of the *pesantren* rather than through formal moral instruction alone.

Discussion

The findings indicate that character formation within the *pesantren* is fundamentally an organizational process rather than merely an instructional one. While previous studies have consistently shown that school culture provides an enabling environment for character education (Holik et al., 2024; Huda et al., 2024; Izfanna & Hisyam, 2012), the present study demonstrates that organizational culture itself functions as the hidden curriculum through which moral values are continuously produced, reproduced, and internalized (AR et al., 2025; Firmansyah et al., 2025; Salim et al., 2024; Syarifah et al., 2025). Daily routines, interpersonal interactions, and institutional

traditions collectively create a moral environment in which values such as discipline, respect, responsibility, and humility are experienced as ordinary social practices rather than externally imposed rules. This finding extends recent scholarship on organizational culture by suggesting that the educational influence of culture lies not only in shaping institutional climate but also in transforming repeated social participation into enduring moral dispositions (Kotten et al., 2025; Mohi Ud Din et al., 2025; Sandeep & Nonang, 2023). Consequently, character formation emerges from students' continuous engagement with the cultural life of the *pesantren* rather than from formal moral instruction alone.

The effectiveness of this organizational culture, however, depends upon its moral legitimacy, which is continuously reinforced through the charismatic leadership of the *kyai*. Unlike conventional educational leadership models that emphasize managerial competence or administrative authority (Smyth, 2005), leadership in the *pesantren* derives its influence primarily from integrity, religious scholarship, and exemplary conduct (Fauzi et al., 2025; Novianti et al., 2025). According to Dahiya et al. (2025), ethical leadership also argues that leaders reinforce organizational values by modeling ethical behavior and creating trust-based relationships that encourage voluntary commitment rather than obedience. Nevertheless, the present findings suggest a more comprehensive mechanism in which the *kyai* functions not only as a role model but also as a moral mediator, translating abstract organizational values into observable everyday practices. Organizational culture, therefore, acquires legitimacy because institutional norms are consistently embodied by the leader, allowing students to perceive moral values as authentic lived realities rather than symbolic institutional expectations.

This process of value internalization further extends beyond the physical boundaries of the *pesantren* through normative social control embedded within students' collective identity. The experience of *santri kalong* demonstrates that institutional discipline persists despite the absence of continuous supervision, as students regulate their behavior through an internalized sense of moral responsibility and community representation. A study by Biesta (2021) has shown that students' self-regulation is strengthened when they develop a strong sense of belonging and perceive institutional values as part of their personal identity. However, unlike most educational settings, where behavioral regulation remains largely dependent on school supervision, the present study reveals that the *pesantren* sustains discipline through community-based moral recognition, in which students continue to enact institutional values because they identify themselves as lifelong representatives of the *pesantren*. This finding suggests that organizational culture transcends institutional space and becomes embedded within broader social relationships, thereby strengthening the sustainability of character formation.

The findings also reveal that the internalization of values is reinforced through institutional temporal structures that organize students' everyday experiences according to the Islamic Hijri calendar. Rather than functioning solely as an administrative scheduling system, temporal organization integrates educational activities with religious rituals and sacred events, enabling students to experience Islamic identity through recurring participation in the rhythm of institutional life. According to Kassa (2025), learning environments shape identity not only through curriculum but also through routines, rituals, and symbolic practices that structure students' lived experiences. While previous studies on Islamic education have emphasized communal worship and religious traditions as important elements of character development (Anam et al., 2019; Firmansyah et al., 2025; Komalasari & Yakubu, 2023; Lafrarchi, 2020; Lukens-Bull, 2013), the present study identifies temporal structuring as an additional organizational mechanism through which religious values are repeatedly reinforced. Recurrent exposure to religiously organized institutional life strengthens the consistency between educational experiences and religious identity, thereby facilitating deeper moral internalization through everyday participation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that character formation in the *pesantren* is best understood as an integrated moral ecosystem rather than as the product of isolated educational

interventions. Organizational culture establishes the normative foundation of institutional life, charismatic leadership legitimizes and exemplifies those values, normative social control extends them beyond institutional boundaries, temporal structuring embeds them within students' everyday religious experiences, and habituation transforms repeated participation into enduring moral dispositions. Although previous studies have generally examined these dimensions independently, the present study demonstrates that their educational effectiveness derives from their continuous interaction within a coherent organizational system. This integrated explanation advances the literature on character education by shifting attention from individual pedagogical strategies toward the dynamic interplay between organizational culture, leadership, social regulation, and institutional practices. Accordingly, the study offers a conceptual contribution by proposing that sustainable character formation in faith-based educational institutions is achieved through the cumulative operation of interconnected organizational mechanisms that gradually transform shared institutional values into students' enduring moral character.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that sustainable character formation within the *pesantren* is best understood as an organizational phenomenon emerging from the continuous interaction of organizational culture, charismatic *kyai* leadership, normative social control, religious temporal structuring, and habituation, rather than as the outcome of formal moral instruction alone. The findings extend existing scholarship by proposing a conceptual model of an organizational moral ecosystem, in which these interconnected mechanisms collectively transform institutional values into students' enduring moral dispositions through everyday participation in organizational life. This perspective advances character education theory by shifting the analytical focus from individual pedagogical strategies and curriculum-based interventions toward the organizational processes through which moral values are legitimized, enacted, and internalized. The study, therefore, offers a novel theoretical contribution by positioning organizational culture not merely as a contextual factor but as the hidden curriculum that integrates leadership, social regulation, institutional routines, and religious practices into a coherent system of character formation. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that efforts to strengthen character education—particularly in faith-based educational institutions—should prioritize the development of value-driven organizational cultures, morally exemplary leadership, and institutional practices that consistently embed ethical values into students' daily experiences, rather than relying predominantly on stand-alone character education programs. Although the findings are derived from a single qualitative case study and should therefore be interpreted within their contextual boundaries, the proposed organizational moral ecosystem provides a transferable conceptual framework that can be examined, refined, and validated through comparative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods research across diverse educational settings.

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