

# Implementing Character Education in Secondary Schools: A Case Study of Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT:

**Background:** Educational institutions in Indonesia face challenges in implementing character education effectively. Current learning systems tend to emphasize cognitive development while neglecting affective and moral aspects. This imbalance limits the holistic development of students, who not only require knowledge but also values, attitudes, and behaviors that shape their social and emotional growth.

**Aims:** This study aimed to explore the implementation of character education at Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara Junior High School in Indonesia. Specifically, it investigated the strategies adopted to foster student character development and identified the factors that hindered or supported the process.

**Methods:** A qualitative descriptive field research design was employed. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, with both primary and secondary sources utilized. Data analysis was conducted using reduction, display, and verification techniques, while source triangulation ensured research validity.

**Results:** Findings revealed that the school implemented character education through role modeling, discipline, habituation, and the creation of a conducive learning environment. These efforts successfully nurtured values such as honesty, responsibility, independence, tolerance, social awareness, democratic attitudes, and religiosity among students. However, challenges persisted, including limited infrastructure, an unsupportive environment, low student awareness of moral values, and negative external influences that weakened student motivation.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that character education can be effectively integrated into school culture when supported by consistent rules, committed educators, and active participation of all school stakeholders. Despite obstacles, sustained efforts in role modeling and habituation demonstrate that character values can be nurtured alongside academic development. For broader impact, schools must strengthen collaboration with parents and communities, invest in adequate facilities, and continuously adapt strategies to confront external challenges. The case of Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara provides practical insights for policymakers and educators seeking to balance cognitive achievements with affective and moral education, thereby contributing to the global discourse on holistic education.

**Keywords:** Character education, Indonesia, Muhammadiyah, Qualitative research, Secondary school.

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## INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a critical issue in global education, as schools are increasingly recognized not only as places for cognitive development but also as environments for moral and emotional growth. In Indonesia, the national education system emphasizes the need to integrate character formation into formal schooling, highlighting values such as religiosity, honesty, tolerance, and responsibility (Hidayatulloh et al., [2024](#); Mujahid, [2021](#)). However, the implementation of character education often faces challenges, including an overemphasis on rote learning and limited attention to affective development, which reduces its effectiveness. Schools frequently struggle to balance academic achievements with efforts to nurture student character, leading to gaps between policy and classroom practices. This issue is particularly urgent in contexts where external influences such as digital culture and peer pressure undermine school-based moral education. The case of Muhammadiyah schools, with their strong religious and cultural missions, offers a unique lens to study how values are instilled among adolescents. Addressing this problem is essential, as weak character development can negatively affect social interaction, emotional control, and academic performance. Therefore, examining how character education is implemented at Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara provides both practical and scholarly contributions.

The urgency of this study also stems from broader debates in international education about how schools can respond to the moral and ethical challenges of modern societies. Scholars argue that fostering social and emotional competencies is as important as teaching knowledge-based skills, particularly in multicultural and diverse contexts (Alattiq, [2024](#); Arghode et al. [2022](#)). While many countries have integrated social-emotional learning into their curriculum, implementation in developing contexts like Indonesia remains inconsistent. Evidence shows that when schools create a positive climate through discipline, role modeling, and supportive policies, students are more likely to internalize values and demonstrate prosocial behavior (Luo et al. [2023](#); Manzano-Sánchez et al., [2021](#)). Yet, in many Indonesian schools, the lack of infrastructure and limited teacher training inhibit these practices from flourishing. Furthermore, rapid social changes such as globalization and digitalization create external challenges that weaken the impact of classroom interventions. By situating this research within the Indonesian educational framework, this study highlights how global challenges intersect with local realities. Thus, the topic is not only locally relevant but also has implications for international discussions on holistic education.

In addition, this study is urgent because character education directly influences students' preparedness to engage in democratic and responsible citizenship. Research indicates that values such as honesty, empathy, and tolerance are critical for social cohesion and sustainable development (Moorthy et al. [2021](#); Thalgi, [2024](#)). Schools, therefore, play a central role in transmitting these values to the younger generation. Unfortunately, many students remain disengaged from moral practices, as reflected in issues like indiscipline, dishonesty, and lack of responsibility. These problems demonstrate the pressing need for systematic and sustained interventions that go beyond curricular content. Studying the implementation of character education in Muhammadiyah schools helps to uncover both the opportunities and the barriers within faith-based institutions. It also sheds light on how religious and cultural frameworks can be leveraged to strengthen student character in contemporary society. Hence, this research responds to both theoretical and practical needs to reframe education as a holistic endeavor.

The rationale of this study lies in bridging the gap between policy aspirations and the lived realities of character education in schools. While Indonesia has adopted character education as a national agenda, its translation into classroom practice is still uneven and fragmented. The case of Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara provides an opportunity to explore how a faith-based institution navigates these challenges while promoting holistic student development. This setting is particularly relevant because it integrates religious instruction with general education, thereby offering insights into how values can be effectively internalized. Moreover, the findings from this study have broader significance for policymakers, educators, and communities seeking to strengthen moral education. By focusing on practical strategies, such as discipline, habituation, and role modeling, the study offers concrete examples of how character education can be operationalized. It also highlights systemic barriers such as inadequate facilities and unsupportive environments, which resonate with challenges faced in many other developing contexts (Knittel et al. [2023](#); Odhus et al. [2024](#)). Thus, the study contributes to both local improvements and international debates about best practices in character education.

Several international studies have investigated the role of schools in fostering positive student character and well-being. Prasetyarini et al. ([2025](#)) found that embracing religious and ethnic diversity in Indonesian secondary schools fostered a positive climate that supported character formation. de Wet, ([2025](#)) highlighted how addressing racism in South African schools required structural and cultural changes, showing the importance of inclusive school climates. Bell et al. ([2025](#)) examined how English secondary school staff and students adapted to COVID-19 measures, illustrating that supportive environments are vital for student resilience. Amani & Mkimbili, ([2025](#)) demonstrated that project-based learning enhanced critical thinking, linking cognitive growth with moral and social responsibility. Mesch et al. ([2025](#)) emphasized that food and nutrition programs integrated with pedagogy could promote behavioral change and support moral education. Babatimehin et al. ([2025](#)) argued that teachers' limited assessment literacy in Nigeria hindered holistic evaluation of students. Chan et al. ([2025](#)) revealed that barriers in addressing self-harm reflected a lack of systemic support in schools. These findings collectively suggest that character education is most effective when integrated into broader school practices, supported by well-trained teachers, and embedded in inclusive cultures.

Other studies further emphasize how external social and cultural challenges constrain character education in developing contexts. Sedekia et al. ([2025](#)) found that Tanzanian girls faced structural and cultural barriers that limited their social participation, reflecting the role of external contexts in moral development. Togo et al. ([2025](#)) showed that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted Malawian youths' education and health, which weakened school-based moral instruction. Kumar & Sharma, ([2025](#)) explored how the proliferation of generative AI in schools raised ethical questions, underscoring the need for new approaches to moral education. Msuya & Abdala, ([2025](#)) demonstrated that competence-based approaches in Tanzanian secondary schools improved both language and moral skills. Bihu & Dachi, ([2025](#)) revealed that perceptions of career progression and retention influenced teacher motivation, indirectly shaping the success of moral instruction. Buyong et al. ([2026](#)) emphasized the role of school counselors in supporting emotional transformation among disadvantaged children in Malaysia. Gómez et al. ([2026](#)) showed how interactive narratives mediated by AI could modernize education while raising questions of ethical engagement. Together,

these studies underscore that character education requires not only curriculum integration but also systemic support, teacher training, and responsiveness to social and technological changes.

Despite extensive research on character education and school climate, there remains a lack of studies focusing on how faith-based schools in Indonesia operationalize character education amidst resource limitations. Much of the international literature centers on Western contexts, where infrastructures and support systems are more developed. While some studies from Asia and Africa highlight contextual challenges, few have examined how schools like Muhammadiyah institutions integrate moral, religious, and civic education in daily practice. This gap is critical because faith-based schools serve large populations and significantly influence national education outcomes. Moreover, most existing studies prioritize either student outcomes or teacher perspectives, without analyzing the interplay between institutional strategies, student responses, and external challenges. By addressing this gap, the present study offers fresh insights into the dynamics of character education in a developing country context.

The purpose of this study is to examine the implementation of character education at Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara Junior High School and to identify both supporting and inhibiting factors. Specifically, the research seeks to document how strategies such as discipline, role modeling, and habituation shape student character formation. It also aims to understand how contextual barriers such as infrastructure limitations and external influences impact the effectiveness of these strategies. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study intends to capture the lived experiences of teachers and students in implementing character values. The research hypothesizes that character education, when systematically applied, contributes significantly to students' moral and social development. Furthermore, it posits that the success of such initiatives depends not only on curriculum design but also on institutional culture and community support. Ultimately, the study aspires to provide both empirical and theoretical contributions to the discourse on holistic education.

## METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive field research design to explore the implementation of character education at Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara Junior High School. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for a deep understanding of the lived experiences of students, teachers, and school leaders within their natural context. Such a design is considered appropriate for capturing the dynamics of behavior, attitudes, and practices related to character education (Aftabi et al. [2025](#); Magistretti et al. [2021](#)). The focus was not on measuring variables numerically but on interpreting processes, meanings, and interactions. Data were collected through multiple sources to ensure richness and depth, including interviews, observations, and document analysis. This triangulation approach was applied to enhance validity and reduce bias in interpretation (Hammerton & Munafò, [2021](#)). The design was guided by the overarching aim of identifying strategies, challenges, and contextual influences in implementing character education. The research followed ethical principles, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality throughout the data collection process.

### Participants

Participants were purposively selected to represent different stakeholders directly involved in character education practices. The study included the school principal, teachers of religion and general subjects, and a group of students from different grades. Purposive sampling ensured that individuals with relevant knowledge and experience were engaged, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings (Lim, [2025](#)). Teachers were chosen because of their active role in modeling values, enforcing discipline, and guiding extracurricular activities. The principal was involved as the policymaker and leader in implementing the school's vision of character formation. Students were selected to reflect their perspectives on how character education was experienced and internalized in daily school life. The diversity of participants allowed the researcher to capture multiple perspectives, enabling a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. All participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity was protected throughout the study.

### Instruments

Three primary instruments were utilized to gather the necessary data: semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' views while maintaining focus on the research questions (Buys et al. [2022](#); Hwang et al. [2023](#)). Questions were designed to elicit insights into practices of discipline, habituation, and role modeling in the school. Observations were conducted to document the daily interactions between teachers and students, with a focus on behavior, routines, and the school environment. Documents such as school policies, extracurricular program records, and classroom guidelines were also reviewed to complement interview and observation data. The use of multiple instruments supported data triangulation, which is essential in qualitative research to improve validity (Kawar et al. [2024](#)). Instruments were piloted before the main data collection to ensure clarity and relevance. Overall, the chosen instruments aligned with the aim of capturing both formal policies and informal practices of character education.

### Data Analysis Plan

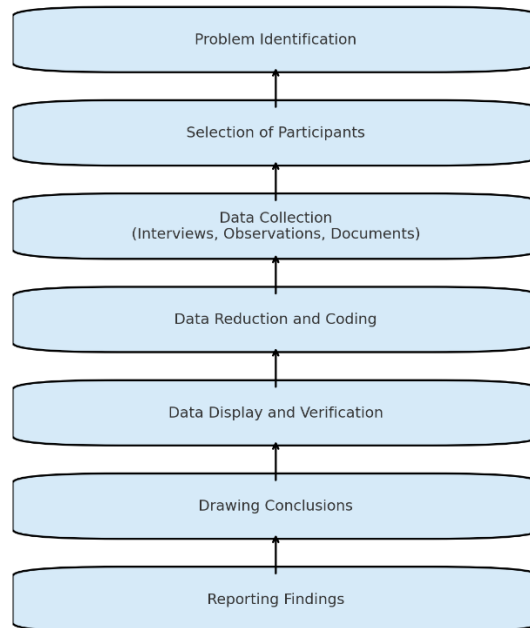
Data analysis followed a thematic approach using the framework of Wang et al. ([2021](#)), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. First, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded to identify emerging themes related to strategies, challenges, and outcomes of character education. Codes were grouped into categories such as "role modeling," "discipline enforcement," and "external influences." Next, data were displayed in matrices and charts to visualize relationships among themes and to facilitate cross-case comparison. Constant comparison was employed to refine categories and ensure consistency across data sources. Triangulation between interviews, observations, and documents was conducted to strengthen the credibility of findings (Bellido-García et al. [2022](#); Morgan, [2024](#)). Member checking was also applied by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to validate accuracy. The final analysis generated a comprehensive understanding of how character education was enacted and what factors supported or hindered its implementation.

**Table 1.** Overview of Research Methodology

Component	Description
Research Design	Qualitative descriptive field research
Participants	Principal, teachers, and students (purposive sampling)
Instruments	Semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and document analysis

Data Analysis Plan	Thematic analysis (reduction, display, verification, triangulation)
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Table 1 provides a concise summary of the methodological framework. It shows how the design, participants, instruments, and analysis strategies were aligned with the study’s purpose. This table enhances clarity for readers by presenting the methodology in a structured format.



**Figure 1.** Research Design Flow

Figure 1 illustrates the flow of the research design, beginning with problem identification and ending with reporting findings. Each step highlights the systematic process used in this study, ensuring transparency and replicability. The figure also emphasizes the cyclical nature of qualitative research, where verification and reflection occur throughout the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The results of this study indicate that character education at Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara was implemented through four main strategies: role modeling, discipline enforcement, habituation, and the creation of a conducive learning environment. Teachers consistently modeled appropriate behaviors in classrooms and school activities, emphasizing punctuality, honesty, and responsibility. Discipline was enforced through clear school rules that were communicated to students and consistently applied by staff. Habituation practices included daily prayers, flag ceremonies, and routine acts of cleanliness that reinforced moral values. The school environment was designed to encourage respect and collaboration, with visual reminders of character values displayed in classrooms. Students reported improvements in their attitudes, particularly in areas of honesty, responsibility, and tolerance, demonstrating the impact of these strategies. Teachers also highlighted that the integration of religious values strengthened students’ sense of responsibility and morality.



Overall, the findings suggest that character education can be successfully embedded into daily school life when systematically implemented.

**Table 2.** Character Values Developed at Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara

Strategy	Character Values Fostered
Role Modeling	Honesty, Responsibility, Independence
Discipline	Obedience, Accountability, Respect for Rules
Habituation	Tolerance, Social Awareness, Cooperation
Learning Environment	Democratic Attitude, Respect, Religiosity

Table 2 shows how different strategies contributed to specific character values. For example, role modeling encouraged honesty and independence, while habituation promoted tolerance and social awareness. This alignment between strategies and values indicates the holistic nature of character education in practice.

## Discussion

The findings confirm that character education can be effectively implemented when integrated into the school's culture and daily routines. Previous studies have emphasized that a positive school climate and supportive teacher-student relationships play critical roles in shaping character outcomes (Prasetyarini et al. [2025](#); De Wet, [2025](#)). The use of role modeling and habituation aligns with global evidence that repeated practices and adult examples reinforce students' moral learning (Bell et al. [2025](#); Amani & Mkimbili, [2025](#)). Furthermore, the integration of religious teachings with general education reflects the unique role of faith-based schools in shaping moral behavior, similar to findings in African and South Asian contexts (Sedekia et al. [2025](#); Togo et al. [2025](#)). The strategies observed in this study also highlight the importance of contextual adaptation, showing how Indonesian schools utilize cultural and religious frameworks to strengthen education. These results suggest that character education is not a separate curriculum but an ongoing practice embedded into routines and teacher conduct.

However, the study also revealed significant barriers that limited the effectiveness of character education. Teachers and the principal reported that limited infrastructure, such as insufficient facilities for extracurricular activities, reduced opportunities for experiential learning. Similar challenges were identified in studies from Nigeria and Tanzania, where lack of resources and teacher training weakened school-based moral programs (Babatimehin et al. [2025](#); Msuya & Abdala, [2025](#)). Moreover, students faced negative external influences from peers and digital media, which often contradicted the values taught in school, echoing concerns raised by Kumar and Sharma ([2025](#)) regarding the ethical challenges of technology in education. Low student awareness and motivation also emerged as obstacles, consistent with findings that engagement is critical for the success of moral education (Mesch et al., [2025](#); Buyong et al., [2026](#)). Despite these barriers, the consistent application of discipline and role modeling created a foundation for gradual improvement. Thus, while challenges persist, faith-based schools can provide valuable lessons for integrating character education into everyday practices.

## Implications

The results of this study have several important implications for both policy and practice. For schools, the findings suggest that character education should be treated as an integral part of school culture rather than as an additional program. Teachers require continuous training to strengthen

their ability to model values and apply consistent discipline. Policymakers must also recognize that infrastructural support, such as facilities for extracurricular activities, is essential to sustain moral education initiatives. At a broader level, collaboration with parents and communities is crucial to reinforce the values students learn at school. The study contributes to international debates by showing how faith-based schools in developing contexts can address challenges while achieving meaningful outcomes. This reinforces the idea that character education is culturally situated and must adapt to specific social realities. Moreover, it highlights the need for multi-stakeholder partnerships to ensure the sustainability of moral education.

### **Limitations**

This study, while insightful, has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, it was conducted in a single school, limiting the generalizability of findings across different institutions. The qualitative design, while rich in detail, means that conclusions cannot be easily applied to larger populations. Data collection relied heavily on self-reported perspectives from teachers and students, which may have introduced bias. Furthermore, observations were conducted over a limited period, potentially missing variations in practices across time. External factors such as family background and community environment were not examined in depth, although they likely influenced student character development. Language and cultural interpretation may also have shaped the way participants expressed their views. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights that can guide further research. Future studies should expand to multiple schools and incorporate mixed methods to enhance validity and scope.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the findings and limitations, several suggestions are proposed for practice and future research. Schools should invest in professional development programs for teachers, focusing on strategies for integrating character values into teaching practices. Policymakers should allocate resources to improve infrastructure that supports extracurricular and moral education activities. Parents and communities should be actively engaged in reinforcing school-based values at home and in society. Researchers are encouraged to conduct comparative studies across different types of schools to identify best practices. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in tracking the long-term impact of character education on student behavior and academic achievement. Moreover, further research should explore the role of digital technology in shaping moral values, given its increasing influence on adolescents. Finally, collaborations between schools, universities, and policymakers are recommended to create sustainable models of character education. Such efforts will ensure that moral education remains a core component of holistic student development.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the implementation of character education at Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara Junior High School in Indonesia, focusing on strategies, outcomes, and challenges. The findings reveal that character education was successfully embedded into the school's daily life through role modeling, discipline enforcement, habituation, and the creation of a supportive learning environment. These strategies cultivated important values such as honesty, responsibility, tolerance, independence, and religiosity, demonstrating that character development can be integrated alongside



academic instruction. The results highlight that consistent practices and the active involvement of teachers and school leaders are key to strengthening students' moral and social growth.

Despite the successes, the study also identified several barriers that hindered the effectiveness of character education. Limited infrastructure, low student awareness, external negative influences, and insufficient parental involvement were significant challenges that reduced the sustainability of the school's efforts. These findings suggest that character education cannot be the responsibility of schools alone but requires collaboration among families, communities, and policymakers. Overcoming these barriers demands structural support, adequate resources, and continuous professional development for teachers.

The study contributes to the broader discourse on holistic education by demonstrating how faith-based schools in developing contexts operationalize moral instruction within constrained environments. It emphasizes that character education should not be treated as an additional program but rather as an integral part of the educational process and school culture. By embedding moral values into routines and reinforcing them through consistent discipline and modeling, schools can play a transformative role in shaping future citizens. Ultimately, the case of Muhammadiyah 4 Metro Utara offers valuable lessons for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to balance cognitive achievement with affective and moral development in diverse educational settings.

#### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

All authors contributed substantially to the completion of this study and the preparation of the manuscript. Agus Kholidin was responsible for conceptualizing the research focus, designing the methodology, and supervising the overall study process. Zuhairi conducted the primary data collection through interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as performing the initial coding and categorization of themes. Buyung Syukron contributed to data validation, triangulation, and interpretation of findings to ensure rigor and credibility of the results. All authors collaborated in reviewing relevant literature, drafting the manuscript, and integrating revisions for publication quality. The final version of the manuscript was read and approved by all authors, who agreed to be accountable for its content and integrity.

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