



The Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Fostering Students' Character: A Case Study at SDS Terpadu Raudlatul Jannah, Gayo Lues

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ABSTRAK

The erosion of moral coherence among children amid digital saturation and shifting social norms has renewed attention to the teacher as a decisive agent of character formation, yet the mechanisms through which Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers shape character in small private faith schools remain thinly documented. This study examines how IRE teachers foster students' character at SDS Terpadu Raudlatul Jannah, a private integrated Islamic elementary school in Gayo Lues, Aceh. Adopting a qualitative single-case design informed by Lickona's components of good character, data were generated through semi-structured interviews with twelve participants (IRE teachers, the principal, homeroom teachers, and students), sustained non-participant classroom observation, and document analysis over three months. Thematic analysis was conducted with NVivo 14, and trustworthiness was secured through triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Findings indicate that IRE teachers foster character not primarily through instruction but through four intertwined roles exemplary modelling, structured habituation, moral mentoring, and school-family bridging that jointly cultivate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, evidenced in students' honesty, discipline, and empathy. The study's novelty lies in reframing the IRE teacher as a relational orchestrator of a moral ecology rather than a transmitter of doctrine, and in documenting this dynamic within an under-studied small private school in a rural, strongly religious region. Practically, the findings offer school leaders and teacher-education programs a transferable model for strengthening character formation where resources are limited but communal faith is robust.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education teachers; character education; role modelling; moral formation; private Islamic elementary school

ABSTRACT

Menipisnya koherensi moral pada anak di tengah saturasi digital dan pergeseran norma sosial menghidupkan kembali perhatian terhadap guru sebagai agen penentu pembentukan karakter, namun mekanisme guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) dalam membentuk karakter di sekolah swasta keagamaan berskala kecil masih jarang terdokumentasi. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana guru PAI membina karakter siswa di SDS Terpadu Raudlatul Jannah, sebuah sekolah dasar Islam terpadu swasta di Gayo Lues, Aceh. Dengan desain studi kasus kualitatif tunggal yang dilandasi komponen karakter baik menurut Lickona, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap dua belas partisipan (guru PAI, kepala sekolah, wali kelas, dan siswa), observasi kelas non-partisipan yang berkelanjutan, serta analisis dokumen selama tiga bulan. Analisis tematik dilakukan dengan NVivo 14, dan keterpercayaan dijamin melalui triangulasi, pengecekan anggota, dan jejak audit. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru PAI membina karakter bukan terutama melalui pengajaran, melainkan melalui empat peran yang

saling terkait keteladanan, pembiasaan terstruktur, pembimbingan moral, dan penjembatan sekolah keluarga yang bersama-sama menumbuhkan pengetahuan moral, perasaan moral, dan tindakan moral, tampak pada kejujuran, kedisiplinan, dan empati siswa. Kebaruan penelitian terletak pada pemaknaan ulang guru PAI sebagai orkestrator relasional sebuah ekologi moral, bukan sekadar penyampai doktrin, serta pada pendokumentasiannya di sekolah swasta kecil yang jarang diteliti di wilayah pedesaan yang religius. Secara praktis, temuan ini menawarkan model yang dapat ditransfer bagi pemimpin sekolah dan program pendidikan guru.

Kata kunci: guru Pendidikan Agama Islam; pendidikan karakter; keteladanan; pembentukan moral; sekolah dasar Islam swasta

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I. INTRODUCTION

The formation of moral character in childhood has become a global educational priority as digital saturation, value pluralism, and weakening communal bonds unsettle the ethical development of the young. International assessments and syntheses report declining moral engagement, rising intolerance, and increased exposure to online aggression among children, signaling that the central challenge of contemporary schooling extends well beyond academic attainment to the cultivation of character (Brown et al., 2022). Within this environment, the teacher has re-emerged as a decisive moral influence, since children acquire values less from precept than from the conduct they observe and the relationships they inhabit. The question confronting educators, therefore, is not whether schools should shape character, but through whom and by what means they most effectively do so.

In Indonesia, where character education is enshrined in national policy and religiosity permeates schooling, this question converges on the Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teacher, who occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of faith, instruction, and moral guidance. Yet the limited weekly hours allotted to religious instruction seldom suffice to translate doctrinal content into lived virtue, which places a premium on the teacher's wider relational and exemplary functions. Understanding how IRE teachers enact these functions is thus essential to any serious account of character formation in Indonesian schools.

Recent scholarship converges on the proposition that teachers shape character most powerfully through modelling, habituation, and the integration of values into everyday school life rather than through didactic transmission alone. Studies of IRE teachers report that character values are internalized when instruction is coupled with exemplary conduct, religious habituation, and a supportive school culture (Nasrullah et al., 2023; Rachman et al., 2023; Cahyanto et al., 2024). Parallel research on teacher professionalism emphasizes that pedagogical, personal, and social competencies jointly determine a teacher's capacity to foster religious character, particularly amid the demands of the Society 5.0 era (Nasikin et al., 2024; Parhan et al., 2024). Complementary work on role modelling demonstrates that students emulate teachers who display integrity and care, such that exemplarity functions as a primary channel of moral learning (Jumatullailah et al., 2025; Aseery, 2024).

Taken together, these strands suggest a consistent but incomplete consensus. The literature affirms that modelling, habituation, and culture matter, yet it tends to enumerate teacher strategies rather than explain how their combination produces character, and it rarely disaggregates the specific roles a single teacher performs. Moreover, the evidence base is weighted toward urban public schools, madrasahs, and secondary or higher education, leaving small private integrated Islamic elementary schools in rural regions markedly under-represented (Kurniawati & Fatimah, 2024; Meriyati et al., 2024). This imbalance limits the transferability of prevailing accounts to the many faith schools operating outside metropolitan centers.

To interpret these processes, this study adopts Lickona's theory of character education as its principal framework, which holds that good character comprises three interlocking components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. The framework is appropriate because it treats character not as knowledge to be transmitted but as an integrated disposition formed through understanding, emotional attachment, and habitual practice, thereby matching the relational and behavioral emphasis of the empirical

literature (Lickona, 1997). Its componential structure also affords an analytic lens capable of distinguishing which dimensions of character a teacher's actions address, moving beyond global claims of "value formation" toward a more precise account of how teaching cultivates each dimension.

Against this backdrop, four interrelated gaps warrant investigation. First, a theoretical gap persists, as much of the literature catalogues teacher strategies without articulating how they map onto the componential structure of character, leaving the mechanism of internalization under-theorized. Second, a contextual gap is evident in the concentration of research on urban public schools and madrasahs, with small private integrated Islamic elementary schools in rural areas seldom examined. Third, a methodological gap arises from the prevalence of brief, single-instrument designs that privilege teacher self-report over sustained observation and multi-informant triangulation. Fourth, an empirical gap concerns the outcome side, since studies frequently assert character gains without specifying which values emerge or how they manifest in pupils' conduct.

These gaps are consequential rather than incidental. Without mechanism-level understanding, teacher-education programs cannot distinguish practices that genuinely form character from those that merely occupy pupils; without rural, small-school evidence, policy models risk being calibrated to well-resourced urban settings and failing where many children actually study; and without process-sensitive methods, the field cannot move from asserting that teachers matter to explaining how they matter. Addressing them is therefore necessary for both scholarship and practice.

This study responds through three deliberate contributions. Conceptually, it reframes the IRE teacher not as a transmitter of doctrine but as a relational orchestrator of a moral ecology, coordinating modelling, habituation, mentoring, and school–family linkage in ways that jointly address moral knowing, feeling, and action. Methodologically, it employs a sustained, multi-source qualitative case design with explicit triangulation, member checking, and audit-trail procedures, enabling teacher roles and their effects to be traced rather than merely reported. Contextually, it situates the inquiry within a small private integrated Islamic elementary school in Gayo Lues, Aceh, a rural and strongly religious setting whose combination of constrained resources and dense communal faith has rarely been documented, yielding a transferable model for comparable schools.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the roles enacted by Islamic Religious Education teachers in fostering students' character at SDS Terpadu Raudlatul Jannah and to explain how these roles cultivate the dimensions of good character. Two research questions guide the inquiry: (1) What roles do IRE teachers enact in fostering students' character in this small private Islamic elementary school? (2) Through what processes do these roles develop identifiable character values among students? By pursuing these questions, the study seeks to advance both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for character formation in faith-based primary education.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative single-case study design, an approach well suited to examining a bounded contemporary phenomenon in depth within its authentic context. The case comprised the character-formation practice of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers at SDS Terpadu Raudlatul Jannah, a private integrated Islamic elementary school located in Gayo Lues Regency, Aceh Province, Indonesia, serving a predominantly rural and strongly religious community. An interpretivist orientation guided the inquiry, on the premise that character formation is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings that teachers and students ascribe to their shared practice. The case was selected purposively because it exemplifies the under-researched category of small private faith schools while sustaining an identifiable and active program of religious and moral formation, rendering it an information-rich site for addressing the research questions.

Participants were chosen through purposive sampling supplemented by snowball referral, yielding twelve informants: three IRE teachers, the school principal, two homeroom teachers, and six students in grades IV to VI who were taught by the IRE teachers. Selection criteria required that adult informants held direct responsibility for the moral and religious formation of pupils and that student informants had been

taught by the IRE teachers for at least one academic year, ensuring familiarity with the practices under study. Three instruments were used: a semi-structured interview guide addressing the roles, strategies, and perceived effects of the teachers; a non-participant classroom and school observation protocol; and a document-analysis checklist covering lesson plans, character-education program records, and pupil conduct notes. Sampling continued until thematic saturation, the point at which additional interviews generated no new codes, was reached.

Instrument validity was established through expert review by two academics in Islamic education and qualitative methodology, whose feedback refined the clarity and coverage of the interview and observation protocols, after which a pilot interview with two non-sampled informants tested comprehensibility and sequencing. Because the study is qualitative, reliability was pursued as dependability: protocols were applied consistently across informants, and inter-coder agreement on a subset of transcripts was assessed, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until consensus coding was achieved. Data were collected over three months, during which each participant took part in one to two audio-recorded interviews of thirty to sixty minutes, conducted in Indonesian and transcribed verbatim, while classroom and school routines were observed and documented in structured field notes and relevant documents were examined to corroborate verbal accounts. Prior to fieldwork, institutional ethical clearance and school permission were obtained; all participants gave informed consent, and for students, parental or guardian consent and pupil assent were secured, with anonymity preserved through coding and the right to withdraw guaranteed throughout.

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, proceeding from familiarization and initial coding through theme construction, review, and definition, with coding conducted in NVivo 14 to support the systematic organization, retrieval, and comparison of coded segments across the three data sources. The analysis was iterative and abductive, moving between the empirical material and Lickona's componential framework of moral knowing, feeling, and action so as to develop explanatory themes rather than descriptive categories. This procedure allowed the roles enacted by the teachers to be linked analytically to the specific dimensions of character they addressed, thereby aligning the analysis directly with the research questions.

Trustworthiness was established according to Lincoln and Guba's criteria. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation across interviews, observation, and documents, and through member checking of preliminary interpretations with key informants; dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail documenting analytic decisions and coding revisions; and transferability was addressed through thick description of the setting, participants, and processes, enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to comparable contexts. Together these procedures ensured that the account presented in the following section rests on a defensible and reproducible analytic foundation.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings in an integrated, descriptive manner, so that each result is reported alongside its interpretation and its dialogue with prior scholarship rather than in a separate discussion. The account follows the analytic logic of the study: it first identifies the roles that Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers enacted in fostering character, and then examines how those roles cultivated the componential dimensions of good character in pupils. Thematic analysis produced two domains and six themes, summarized in Table 1, which together portray a coordinated moral ecology rather than a set of discrete teaching techniques.

Table 1. Domains, Themes, and Illustrative Codes

Domain	Theme	Illustrative codes
Teacher roles	Exemplary modelling	Punctual prayer; honesty enacted; visible sincerity
	Structured habituation	Routine worship; greetings; tidiness drills
	Moral mentoring	Individual guidance; reflective dialogue; correction
	School–family bridging	Parent liaison; home habit alignment
Character outcomes	Moral knowing & feeling	Value understanding; empathy; conscience
	Moral action	Honesty; discipline; helping behavior

The most prominent finding was that IRE teachers fostered character chiefly through exemplary modelling, embodying the values they sought to instill rather than merely articulating them. Observation confirmed that teachers arrived punctually for congregational prayer, spoke truthfully about their own lapses, and treated pupils with consistent courtesy, and students repeatedly traced their own conduct to this example rather than to formal instruction.

“Our teacher does not only tell us to pray on time; he is already there before us. That is why we feel ashamed to be late.” (S3, grade VI)

Interpreted through Lickona’s framework, modelling operates simultaneously on moral feeling and moral action, supplying pupils with an emotionally resonant standard that they are disposed to imitate. This finding corroborates research identifying teacher exemplarity as a primary channel of moral learning (Jumatullailah et al., 2025; Aseery, 2024), yet it extends that literature by showing that, in a small faith school, exemplarity is not one strategy among many but the axis around which the other roles revolve. Where didactic accounts treat modelling as reinforcement for explicit teaching, the present case suggests the reverse: instruction acquired credibility only because it was visibly enacted, positioning the teacher’s embodied integrity as the precondition for character formation rather than its supplement.

A second role concerned structured habituation, through which teachers embedded moral practice into the daily rhythm of the school until it became routine. Documentary evidence confirmed scheduled congregational prayer, standardized greetings, and regular tidiness and honesty routines, and teachers described this regularity as the means by which understanding was converted into settled habit.

“Character cannot be finished in one lesson. We repeat the good habits every day until the children no longer need to be told.” (T1, IRE teacher)

This pattern aligns closely with Indonesian research demonstrating that habituation consolidates religious and moral character (Nurizah & Amrullah, 2024; Rachman et al., 2023), and it maps directly onto Lickona’s insistence that moral action is secured through repeated practice rather than cognition alone. The contribution here lies in clarifying the division of labour between roles: whereas modelling furnished the standard, habituation furnished the mechanism of its entrenchment, so that the two operated in tandem. This complementarity qualifies accounts that treat habituation as sufficient in itself, indicating instead that routine acquires moral meaning only when anchored to a credible exemplar whom pupils are motivated to emulate.

Beyond modelling and habituation, teachers acted as moral mentors and as bridges to the home,

addressing character where routine alone proved insufficient. Mentoring took the form of individual guidance and reflective dialogue following misconduct, in which teachers elicited pupils' reasoning rather than imposing sanction, thereby cultivating moral knowing and conscience.

"When a child lies, I do not punish immediately. I ask him what he feels and what Allah sees. Slowly he learns to judge himself." (T2, IRE teacher)

The teachers further sought to align school and home expectations, communicating with parents to sustain moral habits beyond the school gate, a practice the principal regarded as decisive for consistency.

"If the school teaches honesty but the home ignores it, the child becomes confused. So, the teachers keep contact with the parents." (P, principal)

These roles resonate with Licona's contention that character is best formed when coherent moral messages span the contexts of a child's life, and with studies stressing that sustainable character formation requires coordination beyond the classroom (Cahyanto et al., 2024; Salamah et al., 2023). The finding also speaks to a recognized tension in the literature, namely that gains achieved through religious lessons often dissipate without reinforcement across settings. By documenting deliberate school-family bridging, the present case identifies a concrete mechanism by which teachers mitigate this attrition, thereby addressing a limitation that prior descriptive accounts have noted but seldom resolved.

Taken together, the four roles cultivated character not as isolated behaviors but as an integrated disposition spanning moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, the distribution of which across the coded evidence is presented in Table 2. Pupils demonstrated understanding of why honesty and discipline mattered, an emotional attachment to these values expressed as empathy and conscience, and corresponding action in the form of truthful and helpful conduct, indicating that the teachers' combined roles addressed all three Licona's components rather than privileging cognition. The manner in which the roles converged upon these outcomes is depicted schematically in Figure 1, which represents the IRE teacher as the relational orchestrator of a moral ecology.

Table 2. Distribution of Coded References Across Character Dimensions

Character dimension	Coded references	Primary data sources
Moral knowing	29	Interviews, documents
Moral feeling	24	Interviews, observation
Moral action	41	Observation, documents
Total	94	—

That moral action attracted the greatest evidentiary weight is theoretically significant, for it suggests that the teachers' emphasis on modelling and habituation successfully carried character beyond understanding into conduct, countering the common pattern in which cognitive transmission dominates at the expense of feeling and action. This configuration substantiates the study's central claim that the IRE teacher functions as a relational orchestrator, coordinating complementary roles into a coherent moral ecology whose combined effect exceeds that of any single strategy.

Not all findings align neatly with the wider literature, and these tensions delineate the model's boundary conditions. Research on teacher professionalism in the Society 5.0 era stresses digital competence as increasingly central to effective religious education (Nasikin et al., 2024; Parhan et al., 2024), yet in this rural, resource-constrained school the teachers' influence rested overwhelmingly on relational and

exemplary capital rather than technological fluency. This divergence does not refute the professionalism literature but qualifies it, suggesting that the relative weight of competencies is context-dependent and that, where digital infrastructure is limited, relational integrity and communal faith can substitute for technological sophistication. Such a boundary condition is rarely articulated in studies conducted in better-resourced urban settings, and its identification marks a contextual contribution of the present case.

These findings carry implications across three registers. Theoretically, the study contributes an integrative account that binds discrete teacher strategies to the componential structure of character, addressing the field's tendency toward enumeration and suggesting that character formation is best understood as the orchestration of complementary roles addressing knowing, feeling, and action together. Practically, the relational-orchestrator model offers school leaders and teacher-education programs a transferable template that privileges exemplarity, habituation, mentoring, and school–family linkage over the multiplication of programs, guidance especially pertinent to small faith schools with limited resources. At the policy level, the findings imply that character-education and teacher-certification frameworks should treat the IRE teacher's relational and exemplary functions as core professional competencies rather than incidental attributes, and should invest in cultivating them alongside pedagogical and digital skills.

Several limitations qualify these interpretations. As a single-case study, the research prioritizes depth over breadth, and its transferability rests on analytic rather than statistical generalization, so comparable dynamics should be tested across multiple small faith schools and regions. The three-month window, though triangulated across sources, cannot establish the long-term durability of the character outcomes observed, which longitudinal designs would be better positioned to assess. Finally, the interpretivist stance, while appropriate to the research questions, foregrounds meaning over measurement, so mixed-method extensions could usefully quantify the prevalence of the identified roles and their effects. These limitations bound the scope of the conclusions without diminishing the study's contribution to explaining how IRE teachers foster character in an under-researched setting

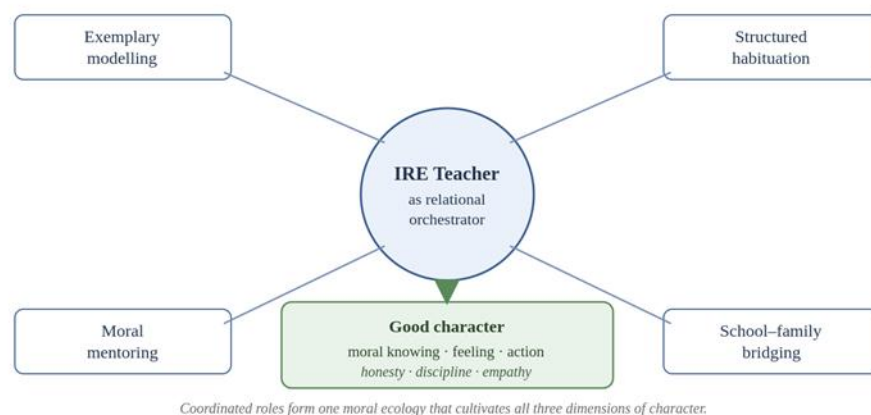


Figure 1. *The Islamic Religious Education teacher as relational orchestrator of a moral ecology.*

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study examined how Islamic Religious Education teachers foster students' character at SDS Terpadu Raudlatul Jannah, a small private integrated Islamic elementary school in rural Gayo Lues. It found that character formation proceeds not principally through instruction but through four coordinated roles: exemplary modelling, structured habituation, moral mentoring, and school–family bridging that jointly cultivate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, evidenced in pupils' honesty, discipline, and empathy. In answering its two research questions, the study shows that these roles function not in isolation but as an integrated moral ecology orchestrated by the teacher, whose embodied integrity anchors the credibility of every other role.

The scientific contribution of the study lies in moving the field from the enumeration of teacher strategies toward an explanatory account that links those strategies to the componential structure of character. Theoretically, it reconceptualizes the IRE teacher as a relational orchestrator of a moral ecology rather than a transmitter of doctrine; practically, it offers school leaders and teacher-education programs a transferable model that privileges exemplarity, habituation, mentoring, and home linkage over the proliferation of programs; and at the policy level, it argues for treating teachers' relational and exemplary functions as core professional competencies. These contributions are especially salient for small faith schools whose communal religiosity can offset material constraints.

Future research should test the relational-orchestrator model across multiple small private faith schools, regions, and educational levels, and should employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs capable of assessing the durability and prevalence of the identified roles and their effects on pupils' character. Comparative studies contrasting rural with urban, and private with public, settings would further clarify the conditions under which teacher-led character formation is most effective. By pursuing these directions, scholarship can build a more explanatory and generalizable understanding of how teachers shape the moral lives of children.

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