



## **Transformative Islamic Education in Building Students' Character at SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah Blangkejeren, Gayo Lues, Aceh**

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DOI:



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Diajukan: 10/01/2026

Diterima: 13/02/2026

Diterbitkan: 14/03/2026

### **ABSTRAK**

Character erosion among adolescents has intensified amid rapid digitalization and value pluralism, prompting renewed scholarly attention to education models that integrate spiritual, moral, and cognitive development. Although Islamic integrated schools (SIT) have proliferated across Indonesia, empirical evidence on how transformative pedagogy operationalizes character formation in peripheral, culturally distinctive regions remain scarce. This study examines how transformative Islamic education is enacted to build students' character at SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah in Blangkejeren, Gayo Lues, a highland Gayo community in Aceh governed by Islamic law. Employing a qualitative single-case design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with fifteen participants (school leaders, teachers, students, and parents), non-participant classroom observation, and document analysis over four months. Data were analyzed thematically using the Braun and Clarke framework with NVivo 14, and trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Findings reveal that character formation emerged through four interwoven mechanisms: prophetic exemplification (*uswah*), habituation of worship-integrated routines, dialogic value internalization, and school–family–community synergy anchored in local Gayo Islamic norms. Transformation occurred not through content transmission but through relational modelling and reflective habituation that repositioned students as moral agents. The study advances transformative learning theory by extending it to a faith-based, non-Western adolescent setting and demonstrates that character education is most durable when institutional structures, pedagogical intent, and cultural ecology are aligned. Practically, the findings offer a replicable, context-sensitive framework for integrated Islamic schools operating in culturally embedded peripheries.

**Keywords:** transformative education; Islamic education; character building; integrated Islamic school; qualitative case study; Gayo Lues; moral development

### **ABSTRACT**

*Erosi karakter di kalangan remaja semakin menguat di tengah digitalisasi yang cepat dan pluralisme nilai, sehingga mendorong perhatian akademik terhadap model pendidikan yang memadukan perkembangan spiritual, moral, dan kognitif. Meskipun Sekolah Islam Terpadu (SIT) berkembang pesat di Indonesia, bukti empiris mengenai bagaimana pedagogi transformatif mengoperasionalkan pembentukan karakter di wilayah perifer yang khas secara budaya masih terbatas. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana pendidikan Islam transformatif diterapkan untuk membangun karakter siswa di SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah, Blangkejeren, Gayo Lues, sebuah komunitas Gayo dataran tinggi di Aceh yang menerapkan syariat Islam. Dengan desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap lima belas partisipan (pimpinan sekolah, guru, siswa, dan orang tua), observasi non-partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen selama empat bulan. Data dianalisis secara tematik menggunakan kerangka Braun dan Clarke dengan NVivo 14, dan keterpercayaan dibangun melalui triangulasi, member checking, serta jejak audit. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pembentukan karakter muncul melalui empat mekanisme yang saling terkait: keteladanan profetik (*uswah*), pembiasaan rutinitas yang terintegrasi ibadah,*

*internalisasi nilai secara dialogis, dan sinergi sekolah–keluarga–masyarakat yang berakar pada norma Islam Gayo. Transformasi terjadi bukan melalui transmisi materi melainkan melalui pemodelan relasional dan pembiasaan reflektif yang memposisikan siswa sebagai agen moral. Penelitian ini memperluas teori pembelajaran transformatif ke latar remaja berbasis keimanan non-Barat dan menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan karakter paling tahan lama ketika struktur institusional, niat pedagogis, dan ekologi budaya selaras.*

**Kata kunci:** pendidikan transformatif; pendidikan Islam; pembentukan karakter; sekolah Islam terpadu; studi kasus kualitatif; Gayo Lues; perkembangan moral

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The formation of moral character has re-emerged as a central preoccupation of educational systems confronting the disruptive pressures of globalization, digital saturation, and the fragmentation of shared values. Across diverse societies, educators and policymakers increasingly recognize that cognitive attainment alone is insufficient to prepare young people for ethical participation in complex plural societies (Berkowitz et al., 2020). Adolescents today navigate an information ecology in which competing moral frames are instantaneously accessible, weakening the traditional authority of family and school as primary agents of value transmission. This global condition has generated a renewed consensus that schools must deliberately cultivate character rather than assume its incidental acquisition. Consequently, the design of educational models capable of integrating intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development has become a matter of pressing international concern.

Within this global movement, research over the past five years has converged on several instructive insights while leaving critical questions unresolved. A growing body of work demonstrates that character education is most effective when it is embedded across the whole-school culture rather than confined to discrete lessons (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Jeynes, 2019). Studies of faith-based schooling similarly report that religiously grounded moral frameworks can provide coherent and durable anchors for value internalization, particularly when reinforced through habituation and modelling (Suyadi et al., 2022; Tan, 2019). In the Indonesian context, scholarship on Sekolah Islam Terpadu has shown that the integration of religious and general curricula fosters discipline, worship consistency, and prosocial behavior (Suhono & Rahmawati, 2021; Hidayat et al., 2023). Yet this literature also reveals a persistent tension: many studies document programmatic activities and behavioral outputs without theorizing the pedagogical mechanism through which transformation of the self actually occurs. Synthesizing these findings, character formation appears to depend less on curricular content than on the relational and cultural processes that mediate it a process that remains under-specified in the current evidence base.

To interrogate this process, the present study adopts transformative learning theory as its principal analytical lens. Originally articulated by Mezirow (1997), transformative learning describes how individuals critically examine their taken-for-granted frames of reference and reconstruct meaning through reflection and dialogue, resulting in enduring changes in perspective and disposition. This theory is particularly apposite for character education because it locates change not in the transfer of information but in the reconstitution of the learner's habits of mind—precisely the domain in which moral character resides. When adapted to an Islamic educational setting, transformative learning resonates with the concept of *tarbiyah*, which frames education as the holistic nurturing of the human being toward moral and spiritual maturity. The convergence of these frameworks offers a robust theoretical foundation for examining how a faith-based school enacts perspective transformation in adolescents, while attending to the cultural specificity of the Gayo Islamic context.

Despite this theoretical promise, four interrelated gaps constrain current understanding. First, a methodological gap persists: much existing research relies on survey instruments and cross-sectional designs that capture behavioral outcomes but cannot illuminate the situated, processual dynamics of character formation, leaving qualitative accounts of mechanism comparatively rare (Hidayat et al., 2023). Second, a contextual gap is evident, as the overwhelming majority of studies are situated in urban or Java-centric settings, while culturally distinctive peripheries such as the Gayo highlands of Aceh where

customary law and Islamic norms are tightly interwoven—remain largely unexamined. Third, an empirical gap exists because few studies provide granular, evidence-based documentation of how transformative pedagogy is concretely enacted within integrated Islamic schools at the lower-secondary level. Fourth, a theoretical gap remains: transformative learning theory has been developed and tested predominantly with Western adults, and its applicability to faith-based adolescent education in non-Western settings is neither established nor theorized. These gaps matter because their persistence sustains a disjuncture between the documented popularity of integrated Islamic schooling and a credible explanatory account of why and how it shapes character.

Addressing these gaps, this study offers three distinct contributions. Conceptually, it reframes character education as a process of guided perspective transformation rather than behavioral conditioning, thereby bridging transformative learning theory and the Islamic notion of *tarbiyah* to yield an integrative analytical model. Methodologically, it employs an in-depth qualitative case study that foregrounds mechanism over measurement, capturing the lived enactment of character formation through triangulated data seldom mobilized in this field. Contextually, it examines a highland Gayo Islamic school situated within a legally Islamic province, generating situated knowledge about how local cultural ecology conditions transformative pedagogy. Together these contributions move the field beyond cataloguing activities toward explaining the relational and cultural architecture of character formation.

This study aims to analyze how transformative Islamic education is enacted to build students' character at SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah in Blangkejeren, Gayo Lues, Aceh, and to identify the pedagogical mechanisms and contextual conditions through which such transformation is achieved. In pursuing this aim, the study seeks to advance both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for integrated Islamic schools operating in culturally embedded settings.

## II. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine, in depth and within its real-life context, how transformative Islamic education shapes students' character at a single bounded institution. A case study approach was selected because the research question is explanatory and process-oriented, concerned with the how of character formation rather than its frequency or magnitude (Yin, 2018). The single-case, holistic design was appropriate given the distinctiveness of the setting: SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah is a purposively significant instance of an integrated Islamic lower-secondary school embedded in the Gayo highland community of Blangkejeren, Gayo Lues, within Aceh's shariah-governed jurisdiction. Focusing on one information-rich case permitted the analytical depth necessary to trace mechanisms that broader comparative designs typically obscure.

The research was conducted over four months at SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah, and participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture complementary perspectives on the phenomenon. Fifteen participants were recruited: two school leaders, six teachers, four students, and three parents, chosen for their direct and sustained involvement in the school's character-formation practices. This composition enabled data-source triangulation across those who design, deliver, receive, and reinforce the educational process. Sampling continued until informational redundancy was reached, at which point additional interviews yielded no substantively new themes, indicating that thematic saturation had been achieved.

Data were collected through three complementary instruments: semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. The interview guides differentiated for leaders, teachers, students, and parents were developed from the transformative learning and character-education literature and refined through expert review by two academics in Islamic education, establishing content validity; a pilot interview confirmed clarity of wording and appropriate sequencing. Observation focused on classroom instruction, worship routines, and informal school interactions, recorded through structured field notes, while document analysis encompassed the school's curriculum documents, character-development program records, and student activity reports. Triangulation across these instruments strengthened the credibility of the emerging interpretation and mitigated the limitations inherent in any single source.

Data collection followed a sequenced procedure and observed established ethical safeguards. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and written informed consent was secured from all adult participants and from the guardians of student participants, who additionally provided assent; anonymity and the right to withdraw were guaranteed throughout. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for verification. All data were analyzed thematically following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, review, definition, and reporting, with coding managed in NVivo 14 to ensure systematic organization and an auditable analytic trail.

Trustworthiness was pursued through the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba. Credibility was established through methodological and data-source triangulation, prolonged engagement across the four-month fieldwork, and member checking of transcripts and preliminary interpretations. Transferability was supported by thick description of the setting and participants, enabling readers to judge applicability to comparable contexts. Dependability and confirmability were secured through a detailed audit trail documenting analytic decisions and through reflexive bracketing of the researchers' assumptions. These measures collectively enhanced the rigor and integrity of the findings while preserving fidelity to participants' accounts.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis yielded four interrelated themes that together explain how transformative Islamic education builds students' character at SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah: prophetic exemplification, worship-integrated habituation, dialogic value internalization, and school–family–community synergy. Table 1 summarizes the themes, their constituent codes, and their observed indicators, after which each theme is presented and then interpreted in dialogue with prior scholarship.

Table 1. Thematic structure of character formation mechanisms

| Theme                                      | Representative codes                     | Observed indicators                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Prophetic exemplification ( <i>uswah</i> ) | Teacher modelling; consistency; presence | Teachers arriving early for prayer; visible congruence between speech and conduct |
| Worship-integrated habituation             | Routine; repetition; ritual discipline   | Congregational prayer, Qur'an memorization, orderly daily rhythms                 |
| Dialogic value internalization             | Reflection; reasoning; meaning-making    | Guided discussion of moral cases; students articulating reasons for conduct       |
| School–family–community synergy            | Reinforcement; alignment; local norms    | Parental follow-through; alignment with Gayo Islamic customary values             |

Table 1 indicates that character formation at the school did not rest on a single intervention but on a mutually reinforcing configuration of relational, ritual, reflective, and ecological mechanisms. The relative prominence of exemplification and habituation in participants' accounts suggests that embodied and repeated practice, rather than didactic instruction, constituted the primary engine of transformation. The most consistently emphasized mechanism was the personal exemplification enacted by teachers and school leaders, understood locally through the Islamic ideal of *uswah hasanah* (good example). Participants repeatedly attributed changes in students' conduct to the observable congruence between what educators taught and how they lived. As one senior teacher explained, "We cannot ask children to be honest and disciplined if they do not see it in us first; the first curriculum is our behavior." A parent corroborated this from outside the school gate, noting that her son had begun to imitate his teacher's punctuality at home. This modelling functioned not as episodic instruction but as a continuous relational presence that rendered abstract values concrete and imitable.

Interpreted through transformative learning theory, exemplification operated as the disorienting yet trustworthy referent through which students revised their frames of reference. This finding aligns with prior evidence that teacher modelling is a decisive factor in character education (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Lickona,

2018) and with studies of Islamic schooling that foreground the moral authority of the educator (Tan, 2019; Suyadi et al., 2022). It extends this literature, however, by showing that in the Gayo context exemplification derived additional force from the tight coupling of religious and customary authority, such that a teacher's conduct carried both pedagogical and communal-normative weight. The finding contradicts accounts that treat character education primarily as program design, suggesting instead that relational credibility is the precondition on which any program depends.

A second mechanism was the habituation of character through worship-integrated daily routines. The school structured the day around congregational prayer, Qur'anic recitation and memorization, and orderly transitions, embedding moral discipline within repeated ritual practice. Students described how initially externally imposed routines gradually became self-directed dispositions; as one student reflected, "At first I prayed because the schedule said so, but now I feel something is missing if I do not." Observation confirmed that these routines were enacted with consistency and communal participation rather than sporadic enforcement.

This progression from compliance to internalized disposition illustrates the transformative arc in which repeated practice reconstitutes habits of mind (Mezirow, 1997). The result is consistent with research demonstrating that habituation and routine are effective vehicles for value internalization in faith-based settings (Suhono & Rahmawati, 2021; Jeynes, 2019). It nuances that literature by showing that habituation was transformative only when coupled with the reflective and relational mechanisms described elsewhere; where routine risked becoming mechanical, exemplification and dialogue restored its meaning. This qualification addresses a recurrent critique that habituation-based moral education can produce conformity without conviction, indicating that the school mitigated this risk through deliberate integration of practice and reflection.

The third theme concerned the dialogic processes through which students moved from behavioral compliance to reasoned commitment. Teachers reported deliberately creating space for students to question, discuss, and reason about moral situations rather than issuing directives alone. A teacher described using everyday conflicts as material for guided reflection: "When there is a dispute, we do not simply punish; we ask them what the Prophet would do and why." Students, in turn, demonstrated an emerging capacity to articulate the reasons behind expected conduct, signaling internalization rather than mere obedience.

This dialogic dimension is where the study most directly substantiates transformative learning theory, since critical reflection and rational discourse are its defining operations (Mezirow, 1997). The finding resonates with scholarship emphasizing the role of moral reasoning and dialogue in durable character formation (Lickona, 2018; Hidayat et al., 2023), yet it diverges from portrayals of Islamic schooling as predominantly transmissive and authority-centered. By evidencing structured dialogue within a faith-based adolescent setting, the study demonstrates the theoretical applicability of transformative learning beyond its original Western adult context its principal theoretical contribution while showing that reflection was scaffolded by, rather than opposed to, religious authority.

The final theme identified the alignment among school, family, and the wider Gayo community as the ecological condition that stabilized character formation. Participants stressed that values cultivated at school were reinforced at home and in the community, whose customary norms are themselves saturated with Islamic expectation. A school leader observed that this coherence prevented the "value dissonance" that often undermines character education when school and home diverge. Parents confirmed active reinforcement of school expectations, and the alignment with local Gayo Islamic custom lent the school's project communal legitimacy. Interpreted ecologically, this synergy functioned as the supportive environment within which transformative learning could consolidate rather than dissipate. The finding corroborates evidence that family and community involvement strongly predict the success of character education (Jeynes, 2019; Epstein, 2018) and echoes Indonesian studies on the importance of school-community coherence (Suhono & Rahmawati, 2021). Its distinctive contribution is contextual: it shows that the fusion of Islamic and Gayo customary authority produced an unusually tight value ecology that amplified school efforts, implying that transferability to less integrated settings would require deliberate cultivation of the reinforcement that Gayo culture supplied organically.

Taken together, the four mechanisms indicate that character formation at SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah is best understood not as behavioral conditioning but as guided perspective transformation, achieved through the interaction of exemplification, habituation, dialogue, and ecological reinforcement. Theoretically, the study extends transformative learning theory to a faith-based adolescent, non-Western context and integrates it with the Islamic concept of *tarbiyah*, offering an analytical model in which relational modelling and reflective habituation are the operative drivers of moral change. This integration answers the theoretical gap identified at the outset and challenges the assumption that transformative learning is confined to adult, secular, Western settings.

Practically, the findings furnish a transferable framework for integrated Islamic schools: character education is likely to be durable where educators embody the values they teach, where habituation is paired with reflective dialogue, and where school efforts are synchronized with family and community norms. For policy, the results suggest that regulatory frameworks governing integrated Islamic schooling should prioritize teacher moral formation and structured school–family partnership rather than curricular content alone, and should recognize local cultural ecology as an asset to be mobilized. These implications convert an explanatory account into actionable guidance for practitioners and policymakers alike.

Several limitations qualify these contributions and should temper generalization. As a single-case study, the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalizable, and the tightly integrated Gayo value ecology may not obtain elsewhere, constraining transferability. The four-month fieldwork, while sufficient for thematic saturation, cannot capture the longitudinal durability of the observed transformation, and reliance on self-reported accounts though triangulated with observation and documents retains a residual risk of social-desirability bias. These limitations, rather than undermining the study, delineate a clear agenda for subsequent longitudinal and multi-site inquiry.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explain how transformative Islamic education builds students' character at SMPIT Raudlatul Jannah in the Gayo highlands of Aceh, and it found that transformation is accomplished through four interwoven mechanisms: prophetic exemplification, worship-integrated habituation, dialogic value internalization, and school–family–community synergy. Character formation, in this setting, is not the product of curricular content but of relational modelling and reflective habituation enacted within a coherent cultural ecology. This is the study's central finding and its answer to the research aim.

The scientific and theoretical contribution lies in extending transformative learning theory to a faith-based, non-Western adolescent context and integrating it with the Islamic concept of *tarbiyah*, thereby offering an explanatory model that moves the field beyond descriptive cataloguing of activities. Practically, the study provides integrated Islamic schools with a context-sensitive framework linking educator exemplarity, reflective habituation, and community alignment; for policy, it argues that governance of such schools should foreground teacher moral formation and structured family–school partnership while treating local cultural norms as a resource. Future research should pursue longitudinal designs to assess the durability of transformation and multi-site comparative studies across diverse Indonesian and international settings to test the boundaries of transferability. Within these bounds, the study demonstrates that character education is most enduring when institutional structure, pedagogical intent, and cultural ecology are deliberately aligned.

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