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Strategies for Strengthening Religious Character in Developing Students' Akhlakul Karimah: A Descriptive Qualitative Study at Madrasah Aliyah Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to describe and analyze the strategies for strengthening religious character to improve students' akhlakul karimah (praiseworthy morals), along with their supporting and inhibiting factors, at Madrasah Aliyah (MA) Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop, North Lampung Regency. A descriptive qualitative field research design was used. Data were collected from the madrasah head, teachers, and students of grades X to XII through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation, analyzed with an interactive model, and validated through triangulation. The strategy consists of five complementary steps, program planning, habituation of religious activities, teachers' role modeling, advice and behavioral guidance, and monitoring and evaluation. The findings indicate that students demonstrated positive moral behaviors, particularly in politeness, respect for teachers, and participation in religious activities, although consistency in discipline and rule compliance remained a challenge. Supporting factors include routine religious activities, teachers' role modeling, peer support, and a conducive madrasah environment. Inhibiting factors include differences in students' character and awareness, limited guidance time, difficulty in self-control, and low enthusiasm. Strengthening religious character is effective when habituation, role modeling, and guidance are consistent and continuously monitored.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a conscious and planned effort to create a learning atmosphere and process so that students actively develop their potential, including spiritual-religious strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, and noble character [1]. Therefore, the success of education cannot be measured by academic achievement alone, but also by the quality of character reflected in students' everyday attitudes and behavior. From an Islamic perspective, fostering noble character is the core of the prophetic mission[2]. This is affirmed in Q.S. Al-Qalam (4) on the greatness of the Prophet's character (peace be upon him), in the hadith narrated by Ahmad that he was sent to perfect noble character, and in Q.S. Al-Ahzab (21) on him as an excellent example. Thus, instilling noble character

is the shared responsibility of all educators and the madrasah environment, not the task of one party or one subject alone.

Efforts to instill character within education are known as character education. Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 defines Strengthening Character Education as an education movement under the responsibility of educational units that aims to strengthen students' character through the harmonization of heart, feeling, thought, and physical exercise, involving cooperation among educational units, families, and communities[3]. One of the values strengthened is religiosity, reflected in attitudes and behavior of obedience to one's own religious teachings, tolerance toward the worship practices of followers of other religions, and living in harmony with them[4]. In madrasahs, strengthening religious character is generally achieved through habituation, role modeling, and religious activities, namely by setting good examples and applying practices and habits in line with children's psychological development[5].

Theoretically, religious character in this study is grounded first in Islamic educational thought. Al-Ghazali views akhlak as a condition firmly rooted in the soul from which actions emerge spontaneously, formed through riyadhah, namely continuous training and habituation [6]. Ibn Miskawayh, in Tahdzib al-Akhlaq, likewise stresses the refinement of character (tahdzib al-akhlaq) through consistent practice and guidance [7]. In Islamic education, character formation is also understood through the concept of ta'dib, the instillation of adab in students [8]and rests on the integration of iman (faith), ibadah (worship), and akhlak (morals), in which faith is manifested in worship and in behavior toward Allah, others, and oneself. In addition, religious character is rooted in religiosity, which according to Glock and Stark, as cited by Waldi, has five dimensions: belief, ritual practice, experience, knowledge, and consequences[9]. In the Muslim context, El-Menouar formulated similar dimensions and emphasized orthopraxy, namely applying religious teachings in daily behavior[10]. From the standpoint of character education, Lickona argues that complete character requires moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action[11], while Bandura's social learning theory explains that behavior is learned by observing models[12]. Islamic education theory also stresses habituation (*al-'adah*) and role modeling (*al-uswah al-hasanah*) so that the values instilled are realized in concrete action[5], and character formation in madrasahs is further strengthened when religious activities are integrated with the academic curriculum[13]. Such efforts cannot be made incidentally but require a strategy, namely a carefully prepared plan of activities to achieve specific goals[14], which in educational processes covers the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation[9]. The focus, therefore, lies not only on the religious activities available in the madrasah but also on how they are designed, implemented, and monitored.

However, student rule violations that do not reflect *akhlakul karimah* have also been recorded in North Lampung Regency, where this madrasah is located. On September 15, 2024, the North Lampung Police and the Kotabumi Kota Sector Police secured 15 teenagers who were about to engage in a brawl, 14 of whom were students [15]. A similar incident recurred on July 27, 2026, when police secured 44 students from several schools in Kotabumi suspected of being about to take part in a brawl [16]. Preliminary interviews with the madrasah head, teachers, and students of grades X, XI, and XII at Madrasah Aliyah (MA) Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop, Sungkai Tengah Subdistrict, North Lampung Regency, showed that the madrasah routinely makes efforts to strengthen religious character. Teachers reported changes in students' discipline and politeness, although not yet even. The madrasah head said that some students still need guidance in obeying rules, while students admitted that they sometimes get carried away joking with friends but try to improve themselves after being reminded by teachers. The madrasah also recorded ten students from grades X, XI, and XII who received warning letters (SP), with details in Table 1.

Table 1. Data on Students Receiving Warning Letters (SP) at MA Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop

No	Grade	Number of Students
1	X	2
2	XI	4
3	XII	4
Total		10

Source: Care/Counseling Record Documents of MA Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop

Research on strengthening religious character in madrasahs has been conducted from several perspectives. Al Ghazali, Tahir, Sampurno, and Wahab examined character building among students of a Madrasah Aliyah in Maros through habituation, role modeling, advice, and religious activities, focusing on the role of Akidah Akhlak teachers[17]. Waldi studied the planning, implementation, and evaluation of religious character formation at MAN 1 Solok Plus Keterampilan [9]. Rahmawati and Yekti studied teachers' strategies through school programs at a madrasah tsanawiyah [18], while Asy'ari and Mukhsin examined madrasah religious culture in shaping students' religious character [19]. These studies highlight the role of teachers, school programs, or religious culture, and were conducted at different institutions and in different regions. Based on the author's limited search, no study has been found that examines madrasah strategies for strengthening religious character in relation to improving students' *akhlakul karimah* at MA Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop.

Based on these preliminary findings, this study is important to obtain a deeper picture of the strategies for strengthening religious character to improve students' *akhlakul karimah* and their supporting and inhibiting factors at MA Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop. The novelty of this study lies in two aspects. First, it examines strategies for strengthening religious character at the madrasah level, not limited to one teacher or one subject, and links them to students' *akhlakul karimah*. Second, it was conducted at the madrasah aliyah level in Sungkai Tengah Subdistrict, North Lampung Regency, a local context rarely found in scientific publications. This study aims to describe and analyze (1) the strategies for strengthening religious character implemented at MA Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop and (2) their supporting and inhibiting factors. Theoretically, the results enrich the study of strategies for strengthening religious character and fostering *akhlakul karimah* in madrasahs. Practically, the results can serve as material for reflection for teachers and madrasah administrators in optimizing students' moral guidance.

2. METHOD

This study used field research with a descriptive qualitative approach. Data sources consisted of primary data obtained from the madrasah head, teachers, and students of grades X, XI, and XII, as well as secondary data in the form of relevant documents and literature. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Data were analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was tested through source triangulation and technique triangulation [20].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Strategies for Strengthening Religious Character to Improve Students' *Akhlakul Karimah*

In madrasahs, strategies for strengthening religious character are understood as carefully prepared activity plans to instill religious values so that they appear in students' attitudes and behavior. Their implementation generally covers the stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation, with habituation, role modeling, and religious activities as the main means. Based on interviews, observation, and documentation at MA Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop, the following findings were obtained.

The general findings show that students' religious character and morals are in varied conditions. Some students are already polite, respect teachers, and obey rules, while others still need guidance, especially in discipline and compliance with rules. One violation still found is skipping class. The madrasah responds to this situation through strategies implemented in three stages, namely program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

3.1.1. Planning the Religious Character Strengthening Program

Planning started from one principle conveyed by the madrasah head: religious education is not enough to provide knowledge about Islamic teachings but must shape behavior that reflects those teachings. From this principle, the madrasah determined the target values for guidance, namely discipline, honesty, politeness, responsibility, and obedience in worship. These five values contain two sides at once: worship of Allah and behavior toward others.

The target values were then designed not only to be taught in class but also to be channeled through four paths: learning activities, religious programs, habituation of positive behavior, and

enforcement of school rules. Through these four paths, values are taught in learning, practiced through activities, habituated in daily life, and safeguarded through rules. The division of roles in this design is quite clear: the madrasah head provides direction and program support, teachers provide teaching, advice, role modeling, and mentoring, students are expected to participate actively, and parents are expected to maintain continuity of guidance at home.

This pattern is in line with Waldi's finding that strategy planning for religious character formation takes the form of guidance and direction for carrying out character formation in the madrasah environment [9]. The involvement of teachers, students, and families also accords with the formulation of Strengthening Character Education, which stresses cooperation among educational units, families, and communities [21]. A characteristic of planning in this madrasah is its orientation toward behavior formation, not merely the holding of activities, so that planning becomes the basis for the four strategies that follow.

3.1.2. Implementing the Religious Character Strengthening Strategy

a. Habituation of Religious Activities

Routine habituation of religious activities is the most visible strategy. The madrasah head, teachers, and students mentioned the same activities, namely *dhuha* prayer, congregational *dzuhur* prayer, *diniyah* activities every Tuesday and Thursday, praying before and after lessons, and reading the Qur'an before lessons begin. The madrasah also holds Friday Cleaning and Sharing to foster concern for the environment and others. The agreement among the three groups of informants shows that these activities are truly part of madrasah life.

Each activity carries its own value. Congregational prayer habituates students to follow activities on time and to worship together with the madrasah community, reading the Qur'an and praying habituate students to begin learning with a religious activity, and Friday Cleaning and Sharing trains concern through real action. Students stated that the activities run according to the madrasah schedule involving teachers and friends, and teach them to be diligent in worship, honest, respectful to teachers and parents, appreciative of friends, helpful, and responsible. Habituation still needs to be accompanied by mentoring so that values are applied consistently, both in the madrasah and at home.

Following Al-Ghazali's idea, continuous habituation is training (*riyadhah*) that makes good behavior rooted in the soul so that it emerges spontaneously [6]. In Glock and Stark's framework, this habituation strengthens the ritual practice dimension [9]

b. Teachers' Role Modeling

The madrasah head stressed that teachers and education staff play a role in setting examples of good behavior because students learn from actions they observe every day. Therefore, discipline, honesty, politeness, and responsibility need to be reflected in teachers' behavior, not only conveyed through explanations in class. Teachers explained that role modeling is realized through daily habits, such as arriving and starting lessons on time, speaking politely, being fair, and speaking honestly. In religious activities, teachers take part in an orderly manner and invite students to participate. According to teachers, students more easily understand the values taught when they see examples of their application directly. This is in line with students' answers that teachers set examples of polite attitudes, remind them about discipline, and explain the importance of telling the truth.

Role modeling strengthens value instillation because it connects words and deeds. This accords with Bandura's social learning theory, that behavior is learned through attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation toward a model [12], as well as with Q.S. Al-Ahzab, 33: 21 on the Messenger of Allah as an excellent example. Fauzi, Syafe'i, and Amiruddin explain that role modeling is shown through educators' words and behavior [22]. However, role modeling needs to be consistent and supported by habituation and guidance so that positive behavior does not appear only when students are under teachers' supervision.

c. Advice, Discussion, and Behavioral Guidance

The madrasah head explained that students who violate rules are given warnings or sanctions appropriate to the type of violation, so that they understand their mistakes and are motivated to

improve their behavior. Guidance also takes differences in character into account because not all students can be directed in the same way. In learning, teachers give advice about the importance of telling the truth, respecting teachers, maintaining good relations with friends, and obeying rules. Teachers also use discussion so that students can express opinions and understand the consequences of their actions, so that they not only know right and wrong behavior but also the reasons for practicing good behavior based on religious and moral values.

Students understand teachers' advice as a reminder to correct mistakes and not repeat them. Guidance is thus not merely warnings and sanctions, but also providing understanding and opportunities to improve oneself. This pattern is in line with moral guidance that combines rules and regulations, habituation, and role modeling as found by Winingsih, Syafe'i, Fauzan, and Fadillah [23], and by Fauzi, Syafe'i, and Amiruddin, who describe advice as a means of guiding students when their behavior needs correction [22]. According to Lickona, advice and discussion foster moral knowing, which needs to be followed by habituation to become moral action [24].

d. Monitoring and Evaluating Student Behavior

Teachers monitor students' behavior through observation during lessons, religious activities, and daily interactions. The aspects observed include discipline, politeness, honesty, compliance with rules, and involvement in religious activities. When behavior that is not yet appropriate is found, teachers give warnings, direction, or guidance according to the situation and students' character. Teachers also stress continuous observation and communication with the madrasah so that behavioral development can be understood comprehensively. The madrasah head said that evaluation is needed to find out which parts of the program are going well and which still need improvement. Monitoring thus looks not only at participation in activities but also at how values are reflected in attitudes and actions. This monitoring is comparable to the evaluation at MAN 1 Solok Plus Keterampilan in the form of supervision, monitoring, attendance records, and monthly reports [9]. The difference is that monitoring at MA Al-Ma'arif Batu Nangkop relies on teachers' observation and communication with the madrasah, so more systematic documentation of monitoring is an opportunity for improvement. Monitoring is important because through this step the madrasah learns that behavioral change is not yet even, and this finding becomes the basis for further guidance.

e. Changes in Students' Behavior and Akhlakul Karimah

According to the madrasah head and teachers, students' moral development varies. Some are polite, respect teachers, and take part in religious activities, while others still need guidance to be disciplined, obey rules, and habituate good behavior consistently. The madrasah head stressed that religious activities need to be accompanied by guidance, because participation in activities does not necessarily mean that the values have been applied in daily life.

From students' perspective, religious activities help them get used to praying, reading the Qur'an, and worshipping together. In social relations they mention the importance of speaking politely, appreciating friends, helping others, telling the truth, not blaming others when at fault, and resolving differences of opinion well. They also admit that consistency in worship at home and the ability to control themselves when joking or upset still need to improve. Within the scope of morals according to Al-Ghazali, these changes appear in behavior toward Allah (obedience in worship), toward others (politeness and honesty), and toward oneself (discipline and self-control) [25]. Religious character is thus a value instilled through learning and habituation, whereas *akhlakul karimah* is the good behavior that appears from it.

f. Analysis of the Strategies Based on the Theories Used

Mapping each strategy onto Glock and Stark's dimensions of religiosity (as cited in Waldi) and Lickona's components of character, with Al-Ghazali's and Bandura's foundations of guidance, the madrasah's strategies touch all five dimensions of religiosity. Habituation strengthens ritual practice, advice and discussion strengthen knowledge and belief, role modeling presents concrete religious experience, and students' *akhlakul karimah* is a manifestation of the consequences dimension, in line with El-Menouar's emphasis that Muslim religiosity must be visible in everyday behavior [10].

3.2. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Strengthening Religious Character

The implementation of strategies for strengthening religious character does not take place separately from its environment. The strategies are influenced by supporting and inhibiting factors, both from students themselves and from those around them. Knowing both kinds of factors is important so that the madrasah can maintain what is going well and find solutions to existing obstacles. The findings are as follows.

Supporting and inhibiting factors are grouped by source, namely students, teachers, the madrasah, and families.

3.2.1. Supporting Factors

This study found several driving aspects conveyed by informants: routine religious activities, teachers' role modeling, teachers' involvement in guidance, student participation, and a madrasah environment that supports habituation of positive behavior. Activities such as praying, reading the Qur'an, and congregational prayer provide opportunities to practice religious values directly, while teachers' advice and supervision help students carry out activities in an orderly way and understand their value. Students added that teachers' example, advice, religious activities, peer support through reminding one another, and enforcement of rules help them habituate good behavior.

These factors show that strengthening religious character is supported by the involvement of various elements in the madrasah. When the madrasah head, teachers, and students play their roles in harmony, habituation of religious values has the potential for long-term prospects.

3.2.2. Inhibiting Factors

The madrasah head explained that differences in students' character and level of awareness are an obstacle to implementing strategies for strengthening religious character. Some students are easily directed, while others need attention and repeated reminders, especially regarding discipline and compliance with rules. Limited guidance time is also a challenge because teachers must deliver material while also guiding behavior. Teachers added that character guidance cannot always be done in depth at every meeting. From the students' side, the obstacles felt include difficulty controlling themselves when joking, lack of enthusiasm for certain activities, and difficulty managing time and choosing peers who support positive behavior.

Obstacles that come from within students, namely awareness, self-control, and enthusiasm, show that strengthening religious character is determined not only by the availability of programs but also by students' readiness to accept guidance and apply the values taught.

3.2.3. Efforts to Overcome the Inhibiting Factors

The madrasah overcomes obstacles through advice, approaches to students, enforcement of rules, and strengthening cooperation between the madrasah head and teachers. Teachers try to set direct examples, invite students to discuss, and habituate positive attitudes during lessons and religious activities. The guidance approach is adjusted to students' conditions so that direction can be understood and helps them improve their behavior. Students also play a role by trying to remember advice, improving their attitudes, and obeying rules.

These efforts are adapted to the characteristics of the challenges faced: differences in character are handled through personalized approaches, limited time is overcome by giving examples and habituation outside formal learning hours, and lack of self-control is addressed through advice, discussion, and rule-setting. Consistent practice aims to foster internal awareness of the importance of upholding religious values, without depending on outside supervision. Overcoming these obstacles thus requires a continuous process that combines role modeling, habit building, guidance, and students' active participation in improving their own behavior [26]. This finding is in line with Shodiq and Kuswanto, who found that teachers' active involvement and school support sustain the formation of religious character through role modeling and habituation, while a less supportive social environment is the main obstacle [27]

4. CONCLUSION

The madrasah carries out five continuous steps: program planning that sets target values and integrates them into learning, religious programs, habituation, and school rules, habituation of

religious activities, teachers' role modeling, advice, discussion, and behavioral guidance, and monitoring and evaluation. This strategy touches the dimensions of ritual practice, knowledge, experience, and consequences of religiosity, as well as the components of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Its impact on *akhlakul karimah* appears in politeness, respect for teachers, and participation in religious activities, but is not yet even, especially in discipline and compliance with rules.

Supporting factors include routine religious activities, teachers' role modeling and involvement, student participation and peer support, school rules, and a conducive madrasah environment. Inhibiting factors include differences in students' character and awareness, limited guidance time, difficulty in self-control, and lack of enthusiasm and difficulty in managing time and choosing peers. The madrasah overcomes them through advice, approaches suited to students' character, school rules, cooperation between the madrasah head and teachers, and role modeling. Overall, this strategy works effectively when its five steps are carried out consistently and continuously monitored, and participation in activities needs to be ensured to result in the application of values in daily life.

Based on these findings, the madrasah is advised to develop more systematic and documented behavior monitoring, optimize guidance time by integrating values into learning, and strengthen communication with parents so that habituation continues at home. Teachers are advised to maintain consistent role modeling and adjust guidance to students' character. Future research could examine the effectiveness of this strategy in greater depth, including the role of parents and changes in students' behavior over time, or compare it with other madrasahs.

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