

Integrated Curriculum Management Based on School Culture as a Strategy for Strengthening Character Education in Integrated Islamic Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse integrated curriculum management grounded in school culture as a strategy for strengthening character education in Integrated Islamic Schools. The research was conducted at Raudhatul Ulum and Menara Fitrah Integrated Islamic Junior High Schools in Ogan Ilir Regency, involving 18 participants selected purposively based on their roles in curriculum and character education programmes. Participants included of school principals, vice principals for curriculum and student affairs, teachers, guidance and counselling (BK) teachers, and programme coordinators. Demographically, they ranged in age from 30 to 55 years, consisted of both male and female educators, and had professional experience between 5 and 25 years. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed. Data were collected through in depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, and validated using source and method triangulation. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. The findings show that school culture based integrated curriculum management is implemented through planning, organizing, implementing, and controlling. Character education is embedded in classroom learning, extracurricular activities, habituation practices, and school culture. The promoted values include religiousness, discipline, social care, independence, and creativity. The study concludes that integrating school culture into curriculum management provides a systematic and sustainable strategy for strengthening character education.



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A. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, character education has become a central issue in educational discourse due to increasing moral challenges, social problems among adolescents, and the growing complexity of social cultural environments faced by students (Singh, 2019). Schools are expected not only to develop academic competencies but also to cultivate essential values such as responsibility, discipline, social awareness, and religiosity as integral components of student development (Arthur James et al., 2016).

However, the implementation of character education often faces challenges at the level of curriculum management. In many schools, it is still treated as a supplementary programme rather than an integral part of the curriculum, resulting in fragmented and less sustainable practices (Pike et al., 2021). Previous studies indicate that character education becomes more effective when it is systematically embedded within curriculum structures, instructional processes, and school routines (Drake & Reid, 2018).

School culture plays a crucial role in this process as it reflects shared values, norms, and behavioural expectations that guide daily interactions within the school environment (Deal & Peterson, 2016). A strong school culture supports the internalisation of values through habituation, social interaction, and role modelling. Empirical studies show that consistent reinforcement of values through daily practices enables character education to function as part of the hidden curriculum that shapes students' attitudes and behaviours (Domitrovich et al., 2017).

Several studies have explored the relationship between curriculum integration, school culture, and character education. Drake & Reid (2018) highlight the role of integrated curriculum in linking cognitive learning with value formation, while Pike et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and school environment. Similarly, research by Domitrovich et al. (2017) demonstrates that social, emotional, and character development are strengthened through consistent environmental practices. However, these studies are largely situated in general educational contexts and do not specifically address Integrated Islamic Schools.

Integrated Islamic Schools represent a distinctive context where national curriculum standards are combined with Islamic values and religious practices to develop students' academic and moral competencies (Syamilah, 2024). In such settings, curriculum management becomes more complex due to the integration of multiple curricular frameworks and value systems, and may vary according to institutional vision and cultural orientation (Sahin, 2018).

Despite growing attention to character education and school culture, there remains a gap in empirical research examining how school culture is systematically integrated into curriculum management within Integrated Islamic Schools, particularly through comparative multi-site approaches. Existing studies tend to examine curriculum integration or school culture separately, rather than analysing their interaction within a unified management framework.

Addressing this gap, this study conceptualises curriculum management functions, planning, organising, implementing, and controlling, as interconnected mechanisms for embedding character values within school culture. By comparing two schools with different cultural orientations, this study offers a contextual and comparative analysis of character education practices. The novelty lies in proposing a school culture-based integrated curriculum management model that combines managerial processes with lived cultural practices, positioning curriculum governance as a strategic framework for sustainable character development. Therefore, this study aims to analyse how integrated curriculum management grounded in school culture is implemented as a strategy for strengthening character education in Integrated Islamic Junior High Schools.

B. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to examine school culture-based integrated curriculum management as a strategy for strengthening character education (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research was conducted at two Integrated Islamic Junior High Schools in Ogan Ilir Regency, namely Raudhatul Ulum and Menara Fitrah, which were purposively selected based on their implementation of integrated curriculum management and school culture-based character education practices.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in curriculum management and character education programmes. A total of 18 participants were involved, including school principals, vice principals, teachers, guidance and counselling (BK) teachers, and programme coordinators. Demographically,

participants ranged in age from 30 to 55 years, included both male and female educators, and had professional experience between 5 and 25 years. Data were collected through in depth interviews, observations, and document analysis using semi structured interview guidelines, observation sheets, and document analysis checklists. Data validity was ensured through source and method triangulation.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles et al., 2014). The data were analysed thematically to identify patterns in curriculum management and character education practices, as well as to enable cross case comparison between the two research sites.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Conceptual Overview of School Culture Based Integrated Curriculum Management

The findings of this study indicate that in both Integrated Islamic Junior High Schools, character education is not positioned as an additional or supplementary programme. Instead, it is systematically embedded within classroom learning, school culture, extracurricular activities, and flagship school programmes. Every school activity is deliberately designed to reflect targeted character values, ensuring that character education becomes an integral part of students daily learning experiences. This integration is managed through core curriculum management functions, planning, organising, implementation, and controlling, so that all character education practices align with the schools vision, mission, and educational goals.

The findings demonstrate that character education is implemented through a comprehensive and coherent approach that connects formal curriculum content with informal learning experiences within the school environment. Such an approach allows students to encounter consistent character messages across multiple contexts, including instructional activities, daily routines, social interactions, and school traditions. As a result, character education is not merely conveyed at the cognitive level but is reinforced through habituation and lived experience.

From a theoretical perspective, this approach aligns with studies suggesting that character education interventions grounded in the school environment and supported by a positive school culture tend to be more effective and sustainable than isolated programme based initiatives (Hermino & Arifin, 2020).

These findings highlight that school culture based integrated curriculum management serves as a strategic framework for strengthening character education. By ensuring coherence between curriculum design, school culture, and daily practices, schools are better positioned to cultivate character values in a systematic and sustainable manner. When values are embedded within a broader cultural ecosystem, students experience continuous reinforcement, which strengthens internalisation and long term behavioural change. However, a critical reflection reveals that such effectiveness is closely tied to contextual conditions. Both schools exhibit strong institutional cultures, shared religious values, and high organisational commitment, which create a conducive environment for value internalisation. This raises an important limitation: the model may not be equally effective in schools lacking cultural cohesion or institutional alignment. Therefore, while the conceptual framework is robust, its success is contingent upon contextual readiness and cultural consistency, which may vary significantly across educational settings. (Simanjuntak et al., 2022).

2. Planning School Culture Based Integrated Curriculum Management

The findings reveal that curriculum planning for character education in Raudhatul Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School begins with a situational and needs analysis, followed by the formulation of character related goals, the development of supporting programmes, the preparation of school action plans, and the allocation of financial resources through annual budgeting. This structured planning process reflects a systematic effort to ensure that character education is not merely aspirational but operationalised through clearly defined programmes and measurable targets.

From a curriculum management perspective, this reflects alignment among objectives, strategies, resources, and evaluation mechanisms (Mickan, 2018). Character education is not merely articulated at the policy level but embedded within strategic planning processes, consistent with findings (Pike et al., 2021). The planning model also reflects the whole school approach, integrating policies, curriculum, school climate, and stakeholder involvement into a coherent system (UNESCO, 2023). Coordination meetings involving school leaders and teachers ensure that character values are intentionally selected and prioritised.

Nevertheless, a critical limitation emerges in the dependence on institutional capacity. Effective planning requires strong leadership, collaborative culture, and resource availability. Schools with limited organisational capacity may struggle to replicate such systematic planning processes. Additionally, the emphasis on institutional alignment may overlook student diversity, as standardised character goals may not fully accommodate individual differences in backgrounds, experiences, and developmental needs (OECD, 2021).

3. Organising School Culture Based Integrated Curriculum Management

The organising function is characterised by a clear distribution of roles among school leaders, teachers, and counselling staff. This structure enhances accountability and ensures that character education is implemented as a shared institutional responsibility (Navaridas et al., 2020).

Teachers play a central role not only in delivering academic content but also in modelling and reinforcing character values. Their role reflects the concept of the hidden curriculum, where values are transmitted through interpersonal interactions and professional conduct (Lee & Louis, 2019).

The presence of distributed leadership further strengthens organisational coherence (Lukman et al., 2021). However, this model is highly dependent on teacher agency, which introduces variability in implementation. As Tao & Gao (2017) argue, teachers interpret and enact curriculum differently based on their beliefs and competencies. This suggests that even with strong organisational structures, the effectiveness of character education may vary across classrooms. Without continuous professional development and supervision, the model risks inconsistency in practice (Shaked, 2023).

4. Implementation School Culture Based Integrated Curriculum Management for Strengthening Character Education

At the implementation stage, both schools involve all members of the school community in strengthening character education. Character values are systematically integrated into classroom instruction, school routines, extracurricular activities, and flagship programmes. Rather than being delivered as isolated moral lessons, character education is embedded in daily school life, ensuring that students encounter consistent value messages across multiple contexts.

Teachers play a crucial role in translating planned character goals into concrete educational practices. Character values are incorporated into lesson planning, instructional strategies, and classroom management. In addition, school routines, such as collective prayers, morning assemblies, language habituation programmes, and disciplinary systems, serve as practical arenas for value internalisation. This pattern reflects the idea that school culture shapes behaviour through shared norms, rituals, and expectations that guide everyday interactions (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

The implementation approach aligns with virtue based character education theory, which emphasises that moral development requires habituation, modelling, and repeated practice rather than mere cognitive understanding of moral principles (Arthur James et al., 2016). When values are reinforced consistently across instructional content, interpersonal relationships, and institutional routines, students are more likely to internalise and embody those values in their behaviour.

Although both schools adopt similar management frameworks, they demonstrate different emphases in character implementation. Raudhatul Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School prioritises religiosity, discipline, and social care within both academic and boarding environments. In contrast, Menara Fitrah Integrated Islamic Junior High School places additional emphasis on independence and creativity alongside religiosity and social responsibility, integrating these values into Qur'anic programmes, extracurricular activities, and student development initiatives.

From a developmental perspective, the emphasis on independence and creativity corresponds with the strengthening of social emotional competencies, including self management, initiative, and curiosity. Evidence from large scale international assessments highlights the importance of social and emotional skills in supporting adolescents academic performance, psychological well being, and long term life outcomes (OECD, 2021). Similarly, meta analytic findings indicate that structured social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions implemented in school settings positively influence students academic achievement and behavioural adjustment (Taylor et al., 2017). These findings suggest that the character values prioritised by both schools are not only aligned with institutional identity but also developmentally appropriate for junior secondary students.

Furthermore, the integration of character education across classroom learning, extracurricular engagement, and daily school routines reflects the characteristics of an effective integrated curriculum. Such integration enables students to move along the continuum from knowing values, to practicing them, and ultimately to becoming individuals who embody those values. Sustainable character formation requires coherence between knowledge acquisition, behavioural practice, and identity development (Drake & Reid, 2018).

5. Controlling and Evaluating School Culture Based Integrated Curriculum Management

Both schools implement multi layered monitoring systems, including supervision, evaluation meetings, behavioural tracking, and counselling support. These mechanisms ensure consistency and provide feedback for continuous improvement (Izzah et al., 2024). The combination of disciplinary systems and mentoring reflects a balanced approach to character development. Parental involvement further strengthens value reinforcement beyond the school environment. However, the evaluation system is largely based on observable behavioural indicators, such as discipline records and participation. While useful, such measures may not fully capture the internalisation of values, which involves

deeper cognitive and affective dimensions. Character development requires more comprehensive assessment approaches, including reflective and qualitative methods. This limitation suggests that current evaluation practices may provide partial insights into character outcomes (Kristjansson, 2018).

6. Differentiating Strategic Characteristics in Strengthening Character Education

The findings reveal that although both schools implement school culture based integrated curriculum management, they demonstrate distinct strategic emphases in strengthening character education. These differences do not indicate variations in commitment but rather reflect contextual adaptations aligned with institutional identity, cultural orientation, and organisational structure.

Raudhatul Ulum Integrated Islamic Junior High School demonstrates a distinctive characteristic through the integration of multiple curricular frameworks, including the national curriculum, the Integrated Islamic School Network (JSIT) curriculum, references to Al-Azhar and the Islamic University of Madinah, and a pesantren based curriculum. This multi curriculum structure requires a high level of coherence management to ensure alignment between learning standards, religious values, and character goals. Integrated curriculum theory emphasises that successful multi curricular implementation depends on systematic mapping of competencies, prioritisation of learning outcomes, and consistency across learning experiences to prevent overload and value fragmentation (Drake & Reid, 2018).

In addition, the presence of a boarding school system extends character formation beyond regular school hours. Character education is reinforced through residential routines, language habituation programmes (Indonesian, English, and Arabic), and structured supervision of student life. The integration of academic and boarding environments creates a continuous moral ecosystem in which character values are practiced across contexts. A strong institutional culture supported by shared rituals and structured routines enhances behavioural consistency and value internalisation (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

In contrast, Menara Fitrah Integrated Islamic Junior High School demonstrates strategic differentiation through its strong emphasis on Qur'anic education. The Tahsin and Tahfidz Qur'an (TTQ) programme is implemented as a compulsory daily activity, complemented by Qur'an certification programmes, Qur'an camps, memorisation competitions, and structured recitation practices during free periods. These initiatives establish a clear cultural core centred on Qur'anic values, shaping the identity of the school community.

The concept of cultural core suggests that schools with clearly defined and consistently practiced core values are more likely to sustain character education initiatives over time. When values become embedded in meaningful routines and shared practices, they evolve into collective identity rather than remaining administrative targets (Lee & Louis, 2019). The institutionalisation of Qur'anic routines at Menara Fitrah reflects this principle, as students repeatedly engage with religious practices that reinforce moral discipline, self regulation, and social responsibility.

From a character education perspective, both models illustrate different but complementary pathways toward strengthening students moral development. Raudhatul Ulum emphasises systemic integration across multiple curricular sources and residential life, while Menara Fitrah prioritises depth of religious internalisation through Qur'anic immersion. Research on character education indicates that

sustainable character formation depends on environmental consistency, mentoring, and coherent value reinforcement within the school ecosystem (Brown et al., 2023).

7. Synthesising a Model of School Culture Based Integrated Curriculum Management for Strengthening Character Education

Overall, the strategic differentiation observed in the two schools highlights that school culture based integrated curriculum management is context sensitive and adaptable. Effective character education does not require identical programme structures; rather, it requires clarity of core values, institutional coherence, and consistent implementation across school practices.

Based on the comprehensive findings of this study, a synthesised operational model of school culture based integrated curriculum management for strengthening character education can be proposed. This model conceptualises character strengthening not as an isolated instructional intervention, but as a systemic process emerging from the dynamic interaction between curriculum management functions and lived school culture. The model consists of five interconnected stages: planning, organising, implementing, controlling and evaluating, and impact. These stages operate not in a rigid linear sequence but in a cyclical and mutually reinforcing manner, forming a continuous improvement loop within the school system.

The first stage, planning, involves aligning character education goals with students needs, institutional vision, and contextual conditions. Planning serves as the normative and strategic foundation that defines the core values to be prioritised and ensures programme relevance. In integrated curriculum theory, alignment between objectives, learning experiences, and assessment mechanisms is essential for coherence and sustainability (Drake & Reid, 2018).

The second stage, organising, focuses on establishing a structured distribution of roles among school leaders, teachers, and guidance counsellors. Effective character education requires clear accountability and cross functional coordination, supported by teacher agency in interpreting and enacting curricular intentions (Tao & Gao, 2017). Organisational clarity strengthens institutional consistency and reinforces shared responsibility in character formation.

The third stage, implementing, reflects the integration of character values across classroom instruction, school culture, extracurricular activities, and daily routines. Cross context integration enables students to progress along the continuum from understanding values to practicing them and ultimately embodying them. Character education thus becomes embedded in habitual practices and social interaction rather than confined to formal moral instruction (Arthur James et al., 2016).

The fourth stage, controlling and evaluating, functions as a feedback mechanism through monitoring systems, supervision, mentoring, behavioural regulation, and parental engagement. This stage ensures that character education initiatives remain consistent and adaptive to institutional dynamics. Moral development requires structured reinforcement combined with relational guidance, as character formation involves both normative discipline and reflective self regulation (Kristjansson, 2018).

The final stage concerns impact, manifested in the development of dominant character traits aligned with each school's cultural core. These outcomes emerge through sustained habituation, role modelling, and ecosystem consistency. Research indicates that character education programmes are more effective when supported by coherent school environments and systematic implementation structures (Brown et al., 2023). Furthermore, when core school culture is clearly defined and consistently

practiced, character values evolve into collective identity rather than remaining administrative targets (Lee & Louis, 2019).

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

This study concludes that school culture based integrated curriculum management serves as a systematic and contextual strategy for strengthening character education in Integrated Islamic Junior High Schools. Character education is embedded within the core management function, planning, organising, implementing, and controlling, rather than implemented as an isolated programme. While both schools apply similar managerial structures, they demonstrate distinct cultural emphases: multi curriculum integration within a school–boarding ecosystem at Raudhatul Ulum and Qur’anic immersion as a cultural core at Menara Fitrah. The findings suggest that sustainable character formation emerges from coherent governance structures combined with consistently enacted school culture, operating through a cyclical interaction of management processes and lived educational practices within the school ecosystem.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, school leaders are encouraged to institutionalise character education within curriculum management processes by ensuring alignment between institutional vision, structured role distribution, and systematic monitoring mechanisms. Strengthening teacher capacity as active agents of character formation through continuous professional development is essential to sustain implementation consistency. Future research is recommended to examine the long term impact of school culture based integrated curriculum management using mixed method or quantitative approaches and to extend comparative analysis across diverse educational contexts to enhance theoretical generalisation.

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