

Integrating Character Education Management for Moral Development: A Qualitative Case Study at Darussalam Islamic Vocational School, Medan

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Abstract: Character education in vocational schools faces unique challenges due to the dual demands of academic competence and professional character formation. This study examines the implementation of character education management in fostering students' moral development at an Islamic vocational school in Medan, Indonesia, focusing on planning, implementation, evaluation, and obstacle mitigation. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven key informants (principal, vice principal, teachers, and students), observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that character education management operates through integrated, systematic, and sustainable processes: planning is needs-based and participatory; implementation occurs through formal learning, school culture, religious habituation, and role modeling; evaluation employs multiple instruments including attitude assessments and parental collaboration. However, significant obstacles include insufficient parental supervision and the negative influence of social media. The school addresses these through reinforcing religious practices, personal development programs, and strengthening school-family partnerships. This study contributes to understanding how vocational schools can systematically manage character education to produce graduates with both professional competence and moral integrity. It recommends enhanced collaboration frameworks and digital literacy programs to address external environmental challenges.

Keywords: Character Education Management, Islamic Education, School Culture, Student Morality, Vocational School

A. Introduction

Education is a systematic process aimed at developing individuals intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and ethically (Steć & Kulik, 2021). Beyond academic achievement, contemporary education increasingly emphasizes the development of character and social-emotional competencies that enable students to become responsible individuals and productive members of society. Internationally, social and emotional skills such as responsibility, self-control, cooperation, empathy,

and persistence are recognized as important competencies for students' academic success, well-being, social relationships, and future participation in the world of work (OECD, 2020). This perspective indicates that education should not be limited to the transmission of knowledge and technical competencies but should also foster students' moral capacity and ability to behave responsibly in different social and professional contexts.

Character education is therefore an essential component of holistic education. It means making a planned and organized effort to help students understand moral values, feel strongly about them, and act in ways that are consistent with those values. Lickona defines character education as having three parts that are all connected: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Character development consequently involves knowing what is right and developing the disposition to value what is right and consistently practicing it in everyday life (Lickona, 2022). Character education should therefore be implemented continuously through teaching, habituation, social interaction, and exemplary behavior. It also needs to be integrated into curriculum, learning processes, assessment, interpersonal relationships, and school culture rather than being treated as an additional or separate school program (Gamage et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2021).

The urgency of character education has increased alongside globalization and rapid technological development. Digital technology provides students with extensive opportunities to access information, communicate, and participate in learning. However, it also exposes them to diverse social influences and values that may affect their attitudes and behavior. The challenge for schools is therefore not only to provide students with digital access but also to develop their capacity to regulate behavior, evaluate information critically, interact responsibly, and make ethical decisions. International evidence suggests that students' social and emotional competencies are influenced by their educational environment and relationships with teachers and peers (Castro et al., 2025; Garcia-Peinado, 2023; Shankland et al., 2024).

In this context, character development requires a school environment that consistently reinforces positive values while also responding to external influences that may undermine students' moral development. These conditions demonstrate that character education requires effective management to achieve sustainable outcomes. Character education cannot rely solely on occasional activities or individual teachers; rather, it requires systematic planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Character education management refers to the application of managerial functions to the development and implementation of programs intended to foster students' moral values and behavior. Effective management enables schools to identify students' needs, establish character-development priorities, allocate responsibilities, coordinate school resources, implement appropriate programs, and evaluate their effectiveness (Mappaenre et al.,

2023). Thus, the quality of character education is closely related to how systematically the school manages the entire process from planning to evaluation.

Planning constitutes the initial stage of character education management. Effective planning should be aligned with the school's vision, mission, student characteristics, and environmental needs. It should also involve relevant members of the school community so that character programs are not merely administrative policies but become shared commitments. Participatory and needs-based planning allows schools to identify the moral and behavioral challenges experienced by students and determine appropriate strategies to address them. The subsequent implementation requires the integration of character values into formal learning, school culture, extracurricular activities, religious practices, and everyday interactions. In this process, teachers and school leaders play important roles as facilitators and role models because students develop character not only through explicit instruction but also through observation, habituation, and repeated social experiences (Tohet & Nuraini, 2026).

School culture is particularly important in transforming character values into everyday behavior. A school environment characterized by discipline, responsibility, respect, cooperation, and religious commitment provides students with continuous opportunities to practice desirable behaviors. Character development becomes more meaningful when values are reflected consistently in school rules, classroom interactions, teacher behavior, student routines, and relationships among members of the school community. Religious habituation can further strengthen moral development in Islamic schools by connecting behavioral expectations with students' religious understanding and daily practices. Previous research has indicated that repeated habituation through school culture can support the internalization of character values because students encounter and practice these values in authentic situations (Sholikah et al., 2025).

Evaluation is another essential component of character education management (Berkowitz, 2022). Because character development concerns attitudes, habits, and behavior, its evaluation cannot depend exclusively on conventional academic assessment. Schools need multiple sources of information to identify students' behavioral development, including teacher observations, attitude assessments, student behavior records, communication with parents, and other relevant forms of documentation. Evaluation also serves a managerial function by providing feedback for improving character programs (Murcahyanto & Mohzana, 2023). Therefore, evaluation should not be viewed merely as a mechanism for judging student behavior but as a continuous process for determining whether character education programs are achieving their intended objectives and what adjustments are required. The Islamic educational context provides an important foundation for understanding moral development. In Islamic education, character formation is closely associated with the development of *akhlak*, which connects individual

behavior with religious values, personal responsibility, and social relationships. Moral education therefore involves not only cognitive understanding but also religious habituation, exemplary behavior, and consistent practice. Teachers and school leaders have an important responsibility to demonstrate the values they expect students to develop. Through role modeling, students can observe how religious and moral principles are translated into everyday behavior (Wahyu Hidayat, 2025; Wardi et al., 2025). Consequently, the integration of religious habituation, learning activities, school culture, and teacher role modeling can provide a comprehensive framework for character development in Islamic vocational schools.

The context of vocational education adds another important dimension to character education. Vocational schools are expected to prepare students with both occupational competencies and the personal qualities required in professional environments. The transition from school to work requires graduates to demonstrate discipline, responsibility, integrity, teamwork, communication, adaptability, and respect for professional norms. These qualities complement technical competencies and influence graduates' readiness to participate effectively in the workplace. The international emphasis on social and emotional skills further reinforces the importance of developing personal and interpersonal competencies alongside occupational skills (Belchior-Rocha et al., 2022; OECD, 2020). Therefore, character education in vocational schools should be connected not only to students' moral development but also to their future professional identity and employability.

Nevertheless, character education in vocational schools is influenced by factors beyond the school environment. Family supervision and students' digital environments can either support or undermine the values developed at school. Limited parental supervision may reduce the consistency of character habituation between school and home, while excessive or inappropriate exposure to social media can introduce behavioral models and values that conflict with school expectations. These external influences demonstrate that character education cannot be managed exclusively within the boundaries of the school. Instead, sustainable character development requires collaboration among schools, families, and other stakeholders, as well as students' ability to navigate digital environments responsibly. Strengthening school-family partnerships and developing students' digital literacy are therefore relevant strategies for addressing contemporary challenges in character education.

Despite the growing literature on character education, there remains a need to examine how character education is managed as an integrated and sustainable process within Islamic vocational schools. Previous studies have discussed character values, school culture, teacher role modeling, and religious habituation, but fewer studies have examined the complete management cycle encompassing needs-based planning, implementation across formal and informal school environments,

multidimensional evaluation, and strategies for addressing obstacles originating from families and digital environments. This gap is particularly relevant in vocational education, where schools must simultaneously develop students' moral integrity and professional character.

This study therefore examines the management of character education in fostering students' moral development at an Islamic vocational school in Medan, Indonesia. The study focuses on four interconnected dimensions of character education management: planning, implementation, evaluation, and the mitigation of obstacles encountered during implementation. Specifically, the research questions are (1) How is character education management planned to foster students' moral development? (2) How is character education management implemented in fostering students' moral development? (3) How is the implementation of character education management evaluated? and (4) What obstacles are encountered and what solutions are implemented to address them? By addressing these questions, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how vocational schools can systematically manage character education through formal learning, school culture, religious habituation, role modeling, evaluation, and school-family collaboration to develop graduates who possess both professional competence and moral integrity.

B. Methods

This research uses field research methods with a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the implementation of character education management in the moral development of students based on the natural conditions in the school environment. The research was conducted at SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan, focusing on the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of the character education program in shaping students' morals. The qualitative approach allows researchers to understand phenomena holistically through direct interaction with research subjects and observation of educational activities taking place in the school.

The sources of research data consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data is obtained through direct information from informants involved in the implementation of character education, namely the principal, vice principal for student affairs, teachers, and students. Meanwhile, secondary data is obtained through supporting documents such as character education programs, school regulations, activity documentation, and other administrative documents. Data collection was carried out using observation, interviews, and documentation techniques to obtain a comprehensive picture of the implementation of character education management in the moral development of students.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman qualitative analysis model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and

conclusion/verification. The validity of the data is tested through source triangulation and technique triangulation, which involves comparing information from interviews, observations, and documentation from various research sources. In addition, the research also applies the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure that the research findings have a level of validity and can be scientifically accounted for.

C. Results and Discussion

Character Education Management at SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan: A Triadic Analysis of Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation

The findings reveal that character education planning at SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan follows a structured, participatory process beginning with needs identification and extending through programme formulation. The principal stated: "We begin by identifying the character conditions and moral issues of students, then jointly review these findings to formulate our vision, mission, and goals. This is not done unilaterally but involves various parties responsible for student guidance." This collaborative approach reflects Terry's (2019) conceptualization of planning as the foundational management function that determines organisational direction. However, the findings extend Terry's framework by demonstrating how needs identification serves not merely as preliminary data collection but as the substantive basis for determining character values, religious values, discipline, responsibility, honesty, politeness, and good moral behavior, that subsequently guide all school programs.

The integration of character values into learning tools and daily habituation activities indicates that planning transcends administrative documentation. Teachers are directed to incorporate character values into their teaching materials and demonstrate these values through exemplary behaviour. The vice principal for student affairs coordinates the development of school culture programs, morning assemblies, religious talks, discipline training, and extracurricular activities. This comprehensive approach aligns with Lickona's (2022) school-wide approach concept, which posits that effective character education must permeate all school activities, curriculum, relationships, and culture.

Previous studies (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2026; Wawan & Wasliman, 2026) have emphasized the importance of systematic character education planning, this research contributes new insights into how vocational secondary schools operationalize planning through collaborative structures involving multiple stakeholders. SMKS TIK Darussalam demonstrates stronger integration of religious values into planning frameworks, reflecting Indonesia's vocational education context where character development is explicitly linked to workplace readiness. The implementation of character education demonstrates comprehensive integration across three domains:

formal learning, school culture, and extracurricular activities. The principal explained: "Character education is implemented through integration into learning materials, co-curricular activities, extracurricular activities, and various habituation activities that take place within the school environment." The PAI (Islamic Religious Education) teacher employs Problem-Based Learning methods to analyze moral issues, while Guidance and Counseling teachers apply humanistic approaches through individual counseling, home visits, and special guidance for students with behavioral challenges.

This multi-pronged strategy reflects Lickona's (2022) tripartite framework of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, which posits that effective character education must encompass not only the intellectual understanding of values but also the emotional commitment to them and the practical ability to demonstrate them in daily behavior. In the domain of moral knowing, students learn character values through formal instruction and analysis of moral dilemmas in PAI classes, where the teacher employs problem-based learning to invite students to analyze moral issues and learn lessons from various life experiences, thereby developing their capacity for ethical reasoning and judgment. In terms of moral sentiment, students build emotional commitment through religious habituation activities such as Quran recitation, Dhuha prayer, congregational Zuhur prayer, and the Jumat Berkah programme. One student noted that these congregational prayer and recitation activities have transformed their perspective on discipline and mutual respect. This demonstrates that the effective dimension of character building is fostered through routine spiritual practice and communal worship.

In the realm of moral action, students practice character through the 5S culture, which includes Smile, Greet, Salute, Polite, and Courteous behaviors, as well as class duties and OSIS activities; the vice principal for student affairs emphasized that the school continuously builds these habits until they become part of the students' personalities, demonstrating that character formation requires sustained practice and repetition until virtuous behaviors are internalized. These findings extend Al-Ghazali's (2004) concept of *ta'dib*, or habituation, and *uswah hasanah*, or exemplary behavior, by demonstrating their operationalization in a contemporary vocational school setting, where the integration of religious practice and communal worship serves as the primary vehicle for character formation. Unlike research by Meyer (2024) that emphasizes cognitive approaches to moral education focusing primarily on moral reasoning development, these findings highlight the centrality of religious practice and communal worship in character formation within Islamic educational contexts, suggesting that the effectiveness of character education in such settings depends significantly on the cultivation of spiritual habits and the creation of a religiously infused school culture that permeates all aspects of school life.

The evaluation system at SMKS TIK Darussalam operates systematically through multiple interconnected instruments, including behaviour observation, violation

point recording, attitude assessment journals, character reports, and teacher council meetings, with the principal explaining that evaluation is conducted through surveys and interviews with students' families and the school community to obtain a comprehensive picture of students' character development. This multi-stakeholder approach operationalises Terry's (2019) controlling function, which encompasses setting standards, measuring implementation, comparing results with established standards, and taking corrective action when deviations are identified. Within this framework, the school's evaluation system encompasses three distinct yet complementary forms of assessment, beginning with formative evaluation conducted through daily observation by PAI teachers, BK teachers, and homeroom teachers, with the BK teacher stating that they record student development and provide special guidance if behaviours deviate from expected character values.

The second component involves summative evaluation, where character values are reflected in report cards and assessments of community satisfaction, and as a homeroom teacher explained, they evaluate moral development by observing student interactions, discipline, responsibility, honesty, and communication with parents and other teachers. The third component comprises collaborative evaluation, which actively involves parents and community members in the assessment process, with the principal elaborating that the school does not evaluate based solely on school observations but also considers information from parents regarding students' behavioural development at home, thereby ensuring a more holistic understanding of character formation. Importantly, evaluation functions as a developmental process rather than a punitive mechanism, and when violations occur, the school implements educational sanctions through personal approaches, counselling services, class teacher mentoring, and parental involvement in behavioural improvement, reflecting the Islamic concepts of *muhasabah*, or self-reflection, and *islah*, or improvement, which position evaluation as a means of character enhancement rather than mere punishment.

In comparison with prior research, while Putri et al. (2024) emphasises the importance of school-family partnerships in character education, this study contributes a more detailed framework for operationalising collaborative evaluation specifically within Islamic schools, demonstrating how the integration of religious principles with systematic assessment procedures can enhance the effectiveness of character development programmes. Furthermore, the findings extend Lickona's (2022) authentic assessment principles by demonstrating how vocational schools integrate community satisfaction as a success indicator, reflecting the vocational education emphasis on social readiness and the preparation of students for meaningful participation in society, thereby contributing to the broader literature on character education assessment in diverse educational contexts.

Obstacles and Mitigation Strategies

The implementation of character education management at SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan faces various obstacles originating from both internal and external factors that collectively challenge the effectiveness of moral development programmes. Internal obstacles primarily manifest as low student awareness, lack of discipline, and insensitivity to guidance, with the PAI teacher noting that the low response of some students to advice poses a significant challenge in moral education, indicating that the internalisation of character values requires sustained effort and patience. External obstacles proved to be equally significant, particularly the influence of peer environments, family backgrounds, uncontrolled social media usage, and broad technological developments. The school principal emphasized that a major challenge lies in the strong influence of the external environment, which sometimes conflicts with the character values instilled at the school. The deputy principal for student affairs also explained that differences in parenting styles and a lack of parental supervision make it difficult to consistently apply the character values fostered at school to the students' daily lives.

In response to these multifaceted challenges, the school employs comprehensive mitigation strategies designed to address both internal and external factors simultaneously, beginning with the strengthening of religious culture through Quran recitation, Dhuha prayer, congregational Zuhur prayer, and Blessed Friday programmes, which serve to reinforce spiritual foundations and create a religiously infused school atmosphere. Exemplary behaviour, or *uswah hasanah*, constitutes a second crucial strategy wherein teachers serve as role models in attitudes, speech, and daily behaviour, demonstrating that character formation occurs as much through observation and imitation as through formal instruction. Personal guidance constitutes the third key approach, wherein Islamic religious education teachers, guidance counselors, and homeroom teachers provide advice, counseling, and individual coaching tailored to students' specific needs and behavioral challenges.

Meanwhile, collaboration between the school and the family serves as the fourth pillar, realized through parent meetings, home visits, and ongoing coordination. Homeroom teachers explain that they collaborate with parents and the school using an educational approach that encompasses offering advice, providing personal coaching, setting an example, and reinforcing character values within the learning process. The fifth strategy involves strengthened regulations encompassing violation recording, guidance provision, behaviour evaluation, and educational follow-up, ensuring that rules function not merely as punitive instruments but as tools for habit formation and character development. In comparison with prior research, this study confirms Lickona's (2022) emphasis on environmental influence in character formation and extends it by identifying specific challenges in the Indonesian vocational education context, particularly the tension between Islamic values and social media influences which creates unique pressures on students navigating

between traditional religious expectations and modern digital culture. The findings also support Hidayat's et al. (2025) assertion that families constitute the primary moral institution in Islamic education, while simultaneously demonstrating how schools can strengthen family partnerships through structured communication mechanisms such as regular reporting systems, parent-teacher conferences, and collaborative problem-solving approaches, thereby creating a more coherent and supportive ecosystem for character development that bridges the gap between school values and home environments.

Theoretical Synthesis and Integration

The findings collectively demonstrate that SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan operationalises Terry's (2019) management framework through a comprehensive and interconnected application of planning, organising, actuating, and controlling functions, thereby establishing a coherent system for character education that permeates all aspects of school operations. In the planning function, the school undertakes systematic character needs identification which subsequently informs vision and mission formulation, programme development, and the integration of character values into both the formal curriculum and broader school culture, ensuring that character education is not treated as an add-on activity but as a foundational element of institutional identity. The organising function manifests through clear role differentiation and coordination among school personnel, with the principal providing policy direction, the vice principal coordinating programmes, PAI teachers reinforcing religious values, BK teachers offering behavioural mentoring, and homeroom teachers monitoring classroom-level character development, thereby creating a distributed leadership structure that shares responsibility across all educational stakeholders.

The actuating function is realised through multiple interconnected strategies including teacher role modelling, religious habituation activities, extracurricular participation, discipline enforcement, and personal approaches to student guidance, all of which work in concert to translate planning documents into lived practice within the school environment. Finally, the controlling function operates through systematic behaviour observation, violation recording, attitude assessment, parent communication, and corrective action, ensuring that character education implementation remains aligned with established objectives and that deviations are addressed through educational rather than purely punitive measures. This integrated application of management functions demonstrates that character education at SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan is not merely a set of discrete activities but a holistic system where each management function reinforces the others, creating a sustainable and coherent approach to student moral development that aligns with contemporary educational management theory while remaining responsive to the specific cultural and religious context of Islamic vocational education in Indonesia.

This integrated approach also reflects Lickona's (2022) comprehensive character education model.

Table 1. Implementation of Lickona's Moral at SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan

Lickona's elements	School Implementation
Moral Knowing	PAI instruction, moral issue analysis, character values in curriculum
Moral Feeling	Religious activities, worship habituation, community belonging
Moral Action	5S culture, class duties, discipline practices, extracurriculars

Furthermore, the findings align with Islamic education principles:

Table 2. Application of Islamic Educational Concepts in Character Education Practices

Islamic Concept	School Implementation
Ta'dib (Habituation)	5S culture, daily prayers, Quran recitation
Uswan Hasanah (Exemplary)	Teacher role modeling, principal leadership
Muhasabah (Self-reflection)	Character reports, behavior journals, student self-assessment
Islah (Improvement)	Personal guidance, educational sanctions, parental involvement
Bi'ah (Environment)	School culture, religious atmosphere, positive peer influence

This research concludes that character education management at SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan demonstrates systematic implementation across planning, implementation, and evaluation functions. The school successfully operationalizes theoretical frameworks from educational management, character education, and Islamic pedagogy through collaborative stakeholder involvement (Mu'alimin et al., 2026; Sriyanto et al., 2026). However, the findings reveal persistent challenges, particularly the tension between school-instilled values and external environmental influences. These findings suggest several implications for practice, including the need to strengthen school-family partnerships through more structured parent education programmes that align character development across both home and school environments, integrate digital literacy into the explicit curriculum to directly address social media influences and character values in digital contexts, and develop enhanced evaluation mechanisms through more objective and systematic character assessment instruments to better capture students' moral growth.

While these implications emerge from the current findings, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations, particularly its focus on a single vocational school, which restricts the generalisability of the results to other educational settings or geographical contexts. To address these limitations and build upon the present research, future studies should examine comparative approaches across different school types and incorporate longitudinal designs capable of assessing the long-term sustainability of character development outcomes beyond the immediate school environment.

D. Conclusions

Based on the research findings on character education management at SMKS TIK Darussalam Medan, it is concluded that the school has systematically implemented management functions, planning, execution, evaluation, and obstacle mitigation, to shape students' moral development. Planning involves collaborative needs identification and value integration into the school's vision, curriculum, and programmes, while implementation is carried out integratively through learning, school culture, religious habituation, counselling services, and teacher role modelling. Evaluation is conducted continuously through multiple instruments and serves as a developmental tool for student guidance. Despite obstacles such as low student awareness, weak parental supervision, peer influence, and social media exposure, the school has responded through religious reinforcement, personal guidance, role modelling, and enhanced school-family partnerships. The study confirms the applicability of Terry's management framework and Lickona's character education model in a vocational school setting, while also operationalising Islamic educational concepts including ta'dib, uswah hasanah, muhasabah, and bi'ah, though the findings are limited by the single-case qualitative design and should be interpreted as context-specific insights rather than generalisable conclusions. Practically, the study offers a replicable model emphasising teacher role modelling, school-family partnerships, and curriculum integration of character values. Recommendations include strengthening parental engagement through structured programmes, enhancing digital literacy instruction, refining evaluation instruments, expanding teacher professional development, and establishing community partnerships for SMKS TIK Darussalam, while policymakers are advised to formally embed character education in vocational curricula, develop systematic assessment instruments, and incorporate digital literacy policies. Future research should employ comparative studies across different school types, longitudinal designs, and quantitative outcome measurement to further validate these findings. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that systematic planning, integrated implementation, and collaborative problem-solving effectively shape student moral development, yet persistent external challenges underscore that character education requires strong synergy between schools, families, and communities to achieve the national education goals of producing students who are faithful, pious, disciplined, and possess noble character.

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