



## Beyond the Formal Curriculum: Hidden Curriculum and Character Formation in Islamic Early Childhood Education

Azza Iftita Shollu Ma'ana\*, Eny Fatimatuszuhro P, Abdul Natsir

Universitas Darul Ulum, Indonesia

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### Abstract:

Early childhood character development requires learning environments that consistently reinforce religious and moral values beyond instruction. This study examines the implementation of hidden curriculum and its contribution to children's development. A qualitative descriptive design was employed to explore everyday practices, supporting and inhibiting factors, and behavioral outcomes. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation involving the principal, teachers, children, and parents. Data were analyzed through data condensation, data display, and verification, while credibility was strengthened through source and triangulation and member checking. The findings show that hidden curriculum was implemented through religious habituation, teacher modeling, 5S culture, queuing, cleanliness, discipline, and school-family activities. Supporting factors included teacher commitment, positive school culture, principal supervision, and parental involvement, while inconsistent parenting, digital exposure, and limited teacher resources presented challenges. The study concludes that hidden curriculum contributes gradually to children's *aqidah*, *ibadah*, and *akhlak*. Practically, schools should intentionally strengthen everyday routines and family collaboration to sustain character formation.

## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical developmental period in which children construct values, habits, and patterns of social behavior through repeated experiences. Therefore, character education requires more than explicit instruction because children learn substantially from what adults demonstrate and what their environments repeatedly reinforce. Recent research emphasizes that teacher-child relationships, supportive classroom interactions, and self-regulation practices contribute to children's social and behavioral development (Rudasill et al., 2022; Montoya et al., 2023). In this context, schools have an important responsibility to create environments where desired values are consistently modeled through everyday practices. Consequently, examining how implicit educational experiences shape children's character is important because it can strengthen early childhood education beyond formal curriculum content and support holistic development.

\*Email Correspondence: [iftitaazzah@gmail.com](mailto:iftitaazzah@gmail.com)

A general challenge in early childhood education is the inconsistency between character values formally taught and those experienced by children in everyday school life. Character development may be weakened when discipline, respect, responsibility, religious practices, and independence are presented as instructional messages but are not consistently reflected in classroom routines and teacher behavior. Research indicates that children's self-regulation and autonomy are influenced by the quality of teacher support and interactions they experience (Etchebehere et al., 2024; Çakın & Sak, 2025). This problem suggests that character education cannot rely exclusively on planned lessons. Instead, schools need coherent environments in which routines, interpersonal relationships, behavioral expectations, and teacher modeling continuously reinforce developmental values (Fitria, 2024; Latifah et al., 2025; Susanti et al., 2025). Addressing this issue is therefore essential for strengthening sustainable character formation during early childhood.

The phenomenon at RA Ar-Rahmat Kedungpari Mojowarno Jombang illustrates how character formation can occur through everyday practices that extend beyond formal classroom instruction. Based on the underlying field research, children routinely experience greetings, prayers before and after learning, congregational *Duha* prayer, the 5S culture, orderly queuing, environmental cleanliness, Qur'anic learning, and teacher modeling. These activities are not limited to discrete instructional sessions but are repeatedly embedded within children's daily school experiences. Such practices correspond with evidence that early childhood teachers can promote autonomy and self-regulation through consistent behavioral guidance and supportive interactions (Öngören, 2023; Etchebehere et al., 2024). The phenomenon therefore provides an important context for examining how implicit routines and social interactions operate as hidden curriculum in Islamic early childhood education.

Previous research has established that early childhood character development is strongly associated with teacher practices, classroom relationships, and repeated behavioral experiences. Rudasill et al. (2022) demonstrated that positive teacher-child relationships contribute to self-regulation development, while Montoya et al. (2023) showed that teacher scaffolding supports children's self-regulation through instructional, organizational, and responsive behaviors. Similarly, research on progressive autonomy indicates that teachers' interpersonal behaviors can influence children's opportunities to act independently (Etchebehere et al., 2024). However, these studies primarily examine specific mechanisms such as self-regulation, autonomy, or teacher-child interaction rather than conceptualizing the broader school environment as a hidden curriculum (Dina & Lama, 2025; Harianto et al., 2026; Khomairohtusshiyamah et al., 2025). This limitation leaves insufficient understanding of how multiple routines, values, and teacher behaviors collectively shape character development.

Other studies have examined hidden curriculum and character-oriented practices, but important gaps remain regarding its operation in Islamic early childhood institutions. Research on preschool self-regulation emphasizes interventions and teacher practices, while studies of mealtime, classroom routines, and social participation demonstrate that children learn through everyday activities beyond formal instruction (Muir et al., 2023; Willemsen et al., 2023). Nevertheless, these studies rarely integrate religious habituation, moral modeling,

school culture, and family collaboration within a single analytical framework. The existing literature therefore provides fragmented explanations of implicit learning processes. Investigating hidden curriculum in an Islamic early childhood context is important because character formation involves not only behavioral competence but also religious and moral meanings embedded in daily interactions. This study addresses that conceptual and contextual gap.

The novelty of this study lies in examining hidden curriculum as an integrated mechanism through which religious habituation, teacher modeling, social routines, discipline, cleanliness, and school–family relationships contribute to children’s moral and character development. Rather than treating these activities as separate educational programs, the study interprets them as interconnected components of children’s everyday learning environment. This perspective complements recent evidence that children’s development is shaped by interactions among teachers, peers, families, and institutional contexts (Soydan et al., 2025; Nilfyr & Ewe, 2025). The study is important because identifying these implicit mechanisms can help Islamic early childhood institutions intentionally strengthen everyday practices that support *akhlak* development. It also provides practical evidence for designing coherent school cultures in which formal curriculum and lived experiences reinforce one another.

Despite growing research on teacher practices, self-regulation, autonomy, and character education, limited empirical attention has been given to how hidden curriculum operates through interconnected religious and social routines in Islamic early childhood education. This study therefore addresses three research problems: how hidden curriculum is implemented through everyday activities at RA Ar-Rahmat, what factors support or constrain its implementation, and how these practices contribute to children’s *akhlak* development. The study argues that hidden curriculum becomes pedagogically meaningful when teachers consistently model desired behaviors, embed values within repeated routines, and collaborate with families to reinforce them across contexts. Accordingly, examining these processes can demonstrate that character education is not confined to formal lessons but emerges through the cumulative influence of everyday institutional practices and relationships.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive approach. This approach was chosen because the study aimed to deeply understand and describe the practice of the hidden curriculum as it occurs naturally in daily life at RA Ar-Rahmat. The research focused on the form and process of implementation of the hidden curriculum, supporting and inhibiting factors, and its contribution to children's moral development. The study was conducted at RA Ar-Rahmat, Kedungpari Village, Mojowarno District, Jombang Regency, East Java. This school was purposively selected due to its religious school culture and various habituation practices relevant to the research focus. The study lasted for approximately three months, from March 1 to May 29, 2026. The qualitative design was chosen in accordance with the research's characteristics, which prioritize experience, interaction, social practices, and context as the primary sources of meaning for the phenomena under study.

Research data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to obtain data on what children and teachers do, how habituation is implemented, and how interactions and role models occur in daily activities within the school environment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, class teachers, students, and parents to explore experiences, perspectives, and explanations regarding the implementation of the hidden curriculum, supporting and inhibiting factors, and observed changes in child behavior. Documentation was used to supplement the data through institutional profiles, student and education staff data, school programs, and activity documentation. Data collection was conducted throughout the research period at RA Ar-Rahmat, adapting to the time and conditions of the informants' activities. The selection of sources and techniques allowed the researchers to obtain data from various perspectives while simultaneously comparing the interview information with the actual conditions found through observation and documentation.

Data analysis was conducted interactively, referring to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which included data condensation, data presentation (data display), and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles et al., 2014). Data condensation was achieved by selecting, focusing, simplifying, coding, and organizing data from interviews, observations, and documentation based on three research focuses. The condensed data were then presented in the form of thematic descriptions, matrices, and category groupings to facilitate the identification of patterns, relationships between themes, and trends in the findings. Furthermore, conclusions were drawn gradually and verified by retracing the field data so that interpretations remained empirically grounded. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, member checking, adequate observation, and documentation of the research process (audit trail). These strategies were used to strengthen the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of qualitative research (Forero et al., 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### Hidden Curriculum as Everyday Religious and Social Habituation

The findings indicate that hidden curriculum at RA Ar-Rahmat was embedded in children's everyday religious and social routines rather than delivered exclusively through formal classroom instruction. Religious habituation included prayers before and after learning, Qur'anic reading, *muroja'ah*, daily supplications, recitation of *kalimat thayyibah*, congregational *Duha* prayer, and the Friday Legi istighosah. These activities were conducted repeatedly as part of the school's daily and periodic routines. The repeated exposure enabled children to experience religious values through direct participation rather than merely receiving verbal explanations. In this context, religious practices became part of the children's ordinary school experience and contributed to the formation of a consistent religious atmosphere.

The implementation of the 5S culture *senyum, salam, sapa, sopan, and santun* further demonstrated how social values were embedded in routine

interactions. Children were encouraged to greet teachers, perform *salim*, respond to greetings, speak politely, and interact respectfully with peers. These behaviors were practiced when children arrived at school, met teachers and friends, participated in learning activities, and returned home. Similarly, queuing was integrated into activities such as entering classrooms, receiving food, using the toilet, and participating in other collective activities. Through these routines, children were repeatedly exposed to behavioral expectations concerning respect, patience, order, and recognition of others' rights.

Teacher modeling emerged as another important component of the hidden curriculum. Teachers demonstrated discipline, responsibility, politeness, cleanliness, friendliness, honesty, and religious practices through their own behavior. The children did not only receive instructions about appropriate conduct but also observed how teachers behaved in concrete situations. Interviews with children indicated that they recognized and reproduced several teacher behaviors, including greeting others, performing *salim*, apologizing, and expressing gratitude. This finding suggests that the hidden curriculum operated through observation and imitation, with teachers functioning as everyday behavioral models within the school environment.

The hidden curriculum was also reflected in the organization of the physical and social environment. Children were encouraged to maintain cleanliness, return learning and play equipment after use, participate orderly in morning assemblies, and follow simple school rules. These practices communicated expectations concerning responsibility, order, and care for the shared environment. Thus, the implementation of hidden curriculum extended beyond individual teacher-child interactions to include routines, institutional expectations, and environmental arrangements. The combination of religious habituation, 5S practices, queuing, teacher modeling, cleanliness, and discipline indicates that character-related messages were continuously embedded in children's everyday experiences.

### **School-Family and Institutional Conditions Shaping Hidden Curriculum**

The findings identified teacher commitment as one of the strongest supporting factors in the implementation of hidden curriculum at RA Ar-Rahmat. Teachers were expected to become behavioral models in their speech, appearance, interpersonal interactions, religious practices, and classroom management. The school leadership emphasized that character formation should begin with the adults who interact directly with children. Consequently, teachers attempted to maintain consistency between the values communicated to children and their own behavior. This commitment enabled religious and social habituation to become part of the school culture rather than isolated activities conducted only at particular times.

A positive school culture also supported the implementation of hidden curriculum. The routine application of 5S, queuing, cleanliness, discipline, religious activities, and collective practices created a relatively consistent behavioral environment for children. The principal contributed through school policies, supervision, and monitoring of teachers and activities. The findings show that hidden curriculum was therefore supported not only by individual teacher initiatives but also by institutional arrangements that maintained recurring

practices. The presence of shared expectations among school members helped establish behavioral patterns that children encountered repeatedly across different school activities.

Parental involvement constituted another important supporting condition, particularly through activities involving teachers, children, and parents. The Friday *Legi istighosah* provided a concrete space in which religious habituation was extended beyond the classroom and connected with family participation. Communication between teachers and parents also enabled the school to convey information about children's character development and expected behaviors. However, the findings showed that parental involvement was not uniform. Differences in parenting patterns meant that some values practiced at school, such as prayer, politeness, queuing, discipline, and responsibility, did not always receive equivalent reinforcement at home. This created differences between children's experiences across educational settings.

The study also identified digital exposure, external social environments, limited time, and teacher resources as constraints. Teachers and the principal reported that children could reproduce language or behaviors obtained from digital content and their broader social environment. At the same time, teachers had to accommodate children with diverse behavioral characteristics within limited instructional time. These conditions made it difficult to provide the same intensity of habituation in every situation. The findings therefore indicate that the effectiveness of hidden curriculum depends on the consistency of messages across school, family, and children's wider environments, as well as on institutional capacity to sustain habituation over time.

### **Hidden Curriculum and the Development of Children's**

The implementation of hidden curriculum was associated with the development of children's religious understanding and *aqidah* through repeated exposure to religious language, practices, and school experiences. Children encountered prayers, *kalimat thayyibah*, Qur'anic learning, and religious activities as regular parts of school life. Rather than being presented solely as abstract concepts, religious values were connected to concrete routines that children could observe and practice. The findings indicate that this repeated exposure helped familiarize children with religious expressions and practices while creating a school environment in which religious behavior was treated as part of everyday life.

The second dimension concerned the development of *ibadah* practices. Children were habituated to pray before and after learning, participate in Qur'anic learning and *muroja'ah*, and join congregational Duha prayer and other religious activities. These practices provided children with repeated opportunities to perform religious behaviors under teacher guidance. The observed outcomes extended beyond the performance of individual rituals. Teachers and parents also reported behavioral tendencies associated with the habituation, including greater patience, discipline, politeness, and attentiveness toward teachers and peers. Thus, *ibadah*-related habituation appeared to function simultaneously as religious practice and as a context for developing behavioral dispositions.

The most visible changes were found in everyday *akhlak*. Children demonstrated behaviors such as greeting others, asking for forgiveness, expressing

gratitude, helping peers, respecting teachers, maintaining cleanliness, waiting for their turn, and taking responsibility for tasks and materials. These behaviors were closely connected with the routines repeatedly practiced at school. The findings suggest that character-related outcomes were most visible when values were translated into simple and observable actions. Rather than emerging from a single instructional intervention, the behaviors developed through repeated participation in routines and interactions with teachers and peers.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the impact of hidden curriculum was gradual and cumulative rather than instantaneous. The development of *aqidah*, *ibadah*, and *akhlak* depended on repetition, teacher modeling, reinforcement, and consistency between school and family environments. When children received similar behavioral messages across contexts, habituation could be reinforced; conversely, inconsistent experiences at home or exposure to contradictory influences from digital and social environments could weaken the process. The findings therefore position hidden curriculum as an experiential dimension of education through which religious and moral values become increasingly familiar through everyday practice. At RA Ar-Rahmat, its contribution to character development was visible particularly through the integration of religious habituation, social interaction, teacher example, environmental discipline, and family involvement.

## Discussion

Research findings indicate that the hidden curriculum at RA Ar-Rahmat operates through the instillation of religious habits, the 5S culture, queuing, cleanliness, discipline, and teacher role models, which are repeated throughout the school routine. These findings align with those of Firdaus et al. (2025), who demonstrated that the internalization of morals in early childhood occurs through the instillation of Islamic etiquette, role models, value reflection, and a religious environment. Hafidz et al. (2025) also found that prayer, the *Duha* prayer, the words "*thayyibah*," and role models are part of a habit-based religious education model. However, this study expands on these findings by demonstrating that religious practices do not stand alone but are connected to social rules and environmental management as a unified daily hidden curriculum experience.

The teacher role models in this study demonstrate that children learn moral values through observing actual behavior, not just through verbal instruction. Children imitate the habits of greeting, shaking hands, apologizing, being grateful, being disciplined, and maintaining cleanliness exemplified by their teachers. This pattern is consistent with Firdaus et al. (2025), who positioned role modeling as the primary process of internalizing noble morals, and Dwistia and Mutiara (2026), who emphasized the relationship between teacher role models and religious habits as a hidden curriculum mechanism in early childhood moral education. Theoretically, these findings reinforce the view that the hidden curriculum is a process of value formation through daily interactions and practices. Practically, teachers need to be consistent models before demanding specific behaviors optimally.

Findings regarding principal support, school culture, and parental involvement indicate that the success of the hidden curriculum depends on the

alignment of the educational environment. These results align with Shobicha (2025), who found that religious habits are stronger when supported by alignment between the institution, family, community, and culture. Conversely, differences in parenting styles, exposure to gadgets, social environments, and limited time and resources are obstacles, indicating that educational messages can experience inconsistencies across environments. These findings provide a practical contribution: schools need to establish ongoing communication with families, agree on core habits, and conduct joint monitoring. Theoretically, the hidden curriculum needs to be understood as an ecological process influenced by the ongoing relationship between school, family, and the child's social environment.

The impact of the hidden curriculum at RA Ar-Rahmat is evident in the development of faith (*aqidah*), worship (*ibadah*), and morals, particularly greetings (*salam*), politeness, responsibility, caring, discipline, and the ability to wait one's turn. These findings align with those of Yasminasari et al. (2026), who found that the practice of reciting the Quran, *murojaah* (recitation), prayer, and the *Duha* prayer, accompanied by teacher role models, is associated with discipline, orderliness, attentiveness, and responsibility. Tiwuk et al. (2025) also demonstrated that the practice of memorizing short surahs (chapters) can support the development of discipline in early childhood. However, this study emphasizes that these impacts should not be understood as instant results. Its primary contribution lies in explaining how the accumulation of simple experiences consistently shapes children's moral behavior gradually and sustainably.

Overall, this research contributes by positioning the hidden curriculum not simply as a collection of unwritten activities, but as an integrative mechanism connecting religious habits, teacher role models, social culture, the school environment, and family involvement. This perspective extends the research of Malahati and Rokhimawan (2024), which demonstrated the role of the hidden curriculum in character development in Islamic elementary schools, to the context of early childhood education with simpler and more repetitive routines. The theoretical implication is the need to view the hidden curriculum as experiences formed through interaction patterns and environmental consistency. The practical implication is that RA institutions need to consciously design a school culture so that the formal curriculum and daily experiences mutually reinforce the development of children's morals in a sustainable and consistent manner.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the hidden curriculum at RA Ar-Rahmat plays a significant role in shaping children's moral development through religious habits, teacher role modeling, 5S culture, queuing practices, cleanliness, discipline, and family involvement embedded in everyday school life. The key lesson is that moral education in early childhood is formed not only through formal instruction but also through repeated experiences, consistent role models, and the alignment of values across children's daily environments. Scientifically, this study contributes to the conceptual understanding of the hidden curriculum as an integrative process connecting religious practices, school culture, social interactions, and family engagement in early childhood education. The findings imply that schools should intentionally strengthen positive hidden-curriculum practices and promote consistency between school and family environments to support sustainable moral

development. However, the study is limited to a single institution and relies primarily on qualitative data from a relatively specific group of informants, limiting the transferability of its findings. Future research should involve multiple institutions with diverse characteristics and employ comparative, longitudinal, or mixed-methods approaches to examine how hidden-curriculum practices influence children's moral development over time.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study.

### USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

During the preparation of this manuscript, AI-assisted technology was used to support language refinement, structural organization, and academic writing improvement. All generated content was carefully reviewed, revised, and validated by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the scientific accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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