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Character Building Strategies in Vocational Schools: The Contribution of PAI and Character Education Teachers to Student Character

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Character Building Strategies in Vocational Schools: The Contribution of PAI and Character Education Teachers to Student Character

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Abstract

This study examines the role of PAI and Character Education teachers in the development of student character in vocational schools, specifically at SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study explores how the pedagogical role of teachers contributes to the development of students' moral and ethical values. The study highlights the strategies employed by teachers in instilling values such as discipline, responsibility, and social care, as well as the challenges faced in character development in vocational schools. The findings show that character development is more effective when teachers integrate religious and moral values into the curriculum and reinforce behavior through consistent school routines such as religious activities and extracurricular programs. The role of the teacher is not limited to teaching content, but also as a moral guide, role model, and facilitator of a positive school culture. The study identifies key supporting factors such as school support, communication between teachers and students, and the consistency of religious programs, as well as barriers from the influence of social environments and media. This study contributes to the understanding of how vocational schools can effectively integrate character education into academic programs and provides practical recommendations to improve teaching strategies in PAI and Character Education.

Keywords: Moral Values, Character Education, Teacher's Role, Vocational School, Pedagogical Strategies.

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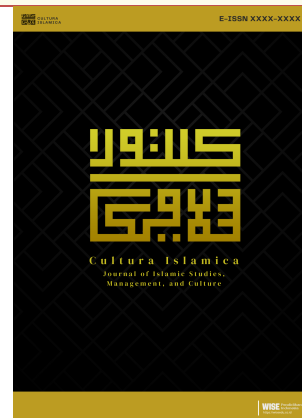
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INTRODUCTION

Attention to character development in students has gained increasing importance in contemporary educational discourse because schools are no longer viewed merely as spaces for knowledge transmission, but as arenas for the cultivation of values, attitudes, and social identities [1], [2], [3]. Amid rapid social changes, the wave of digitalization, and moral challenges in the adolescent environment, character education has become a fundamental necessity for students to develop self-control, responsibility, and ethical behavior in daily life [4], [5], [6], [7]. In the context of vocational secondary education, character development also plays a strategic role as students are prepared not only to be job-ready but also to possess integrity, work ethics, and the ability to interact healthily in both the industrial and social spheres [8], [9], [10], [11].

However, various studies show that the implementation of character education in schools often faces obstacles at the practical level [12], [13], [14]. These challenges may include inconsistencies in the application of values in the classroom, limited role models within the school environment, and gaps between school programs and the actual behavior of students [15], [16]. On the other hand, learning that is overly focused on cognitive aspects and the completion of material also has the potential to reduce the intensity of planned character development [17], [18], [19]. As a result, character education often ends up as a normative slogan rather than a living learning culture that is internalized into students' habits.

In such a situation, teachers hold a central position as key actors who bridge the goals of character education with real learning practices [20], [21]. Teachers are not only responsible for delivering content but also act as moral guides, behavioral role models, facilitators of value habituation, and managers of a classroom climate conducive to character development [22], [23]. This role requires pedagogical skills that are sensitive to students' needs, consistency in behavior, and the ability to manage the social dynamics of adolescents [24], [25]. Therefore, character development cannot be separated from the quality of the interactions between teachers and students that occur repeatedly in the school routine.

Research conducted by Susi Susilawati [26], Bagus Firmansyah [27], Agus Nasrullah [28], Feni Handayani [29], and Ahmad Abdul Rochim [30] highlights the important role of PAI teachers in the formation of religious, disciplinary, and moral character. Susi Susilawati [26] emphasizes the impact of PAI in the internalization of religious values, but focuses more on the normative aspects. Agus Nasrullah [28] identified challenges in the consistency of applying character values and the involvement of parents in vocational schools [27], studying the influence of teacher competence and parental attention, but with a quantitative approach that did not delve deeply. Most studies focus solely on religious character, without integrating character education values in vocational schools.

This study fills this gap by examining the integrated role of PAI and Character Education teachers in character development at vocational schools, specifically at SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah. The focus is on the pedagogical process, contextual strategies, and the dynamics of character values within the vocational school culture. The novelty of this study lies in: (1) the integration of PAI and Character Education teachers for holistic character development; (2) focusing on the context of vocational schools with unique socio-cultural characteristics; and (3) using a qualitative approach to uncover contextual and sustainable

character-building practices and strategies. This study contributes a new model for character education in vocational schools that aligns with the needs of national character education.

The context of SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah is an important area of study because vocational schools have unique student characteristics and learning environments. SMK students face the demands of discipline, vocational skills, work readiness, and the development of a professional work ethic. At the same time, the adolescent phase brings complex social dynamics, such as identity searching, peer influence, and moral challenges that can affect learning behavior and school culture. In such a situation, the role of PAI and Character Education teachers becomes significant in building a strong character foundation for both academic life and students' readiness to enter the workforce and society.

Based on this urgency, this study aims to analyze the role of PAI and Character Education teachers in shaping student character at SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah. The study focuses on the roles played by teachers in teaching and school activities, the character-building strategies used, and the supporting and inhibiting factors that affect the implementation of these roles. This study is expected to provide empirical contributions to strengthening character education practices in vocational schools, while also producing recommendations that can be used to improve the quality of PAI and Character Education teaching to be more effective in shaping student character sustainably.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach aimed at uncovering the role of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Character Education teachers in shaping student character at SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah, as well as identifying the challenges faced by teachers in this process. Data were collected through three main techniques: interviews, observations, and documentation. Interviews were conducted with PAI and Character Education teachers, as well as 11th-grade students, to explore their experiences, character-building strategies, and the obstacles encountered during the process. Observations were used to capture teacher-student interactions and learning situations that reflect character-building practices. Documentation supported the findings with written evidence, such as activity records, school archives, and other relevant documents.

The data analysis process was conducted iteratively through three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. In the reduction stage, the researcher selected and categorized information relevant to the main themes. In the data presentation stage, the results of the analysis were organized into thematic narratives to illustrate the emerging patterns in the teachers' roles and the challenges they faced. Conclusion drawing was done by verifying the consistency of the data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation, and rechecking was conducted if discrepancies were found between the data to ensure that the findings were stable and reliable. To ensure the credibility of the findings, this study used technique triangulation and time triangulation, aiming to test the consistency of the data and reduce the potential bias in data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Role of PAI Teachers in Shaping Students' Character

The findings of this study show that PAI teachers at SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah play a central role in character development by integrating moral and religious values into teaching and reinforcing behavior through school habituation practices [31], [32], [33]. This role is not only visible in the delivery of content but also in the teacher's efforts to connect the learning material with real-life attitudes such as discipline, responsibility, and social care within the school environment [34], [35], [36]. Religious habituation programs, such as congregational Dhuha prayers and reading the Qur'an before lessons, are important instruments that help ensure the consistent and repeated practice of character values [37], [38], [39].

In addition to these routines, character development is extended through student involvement in self-development activities such as scouting, PMR (Red Cross Youth), OSIS (student council), and social-religious activities that foster leadership, cooperation, and empathy. In this context, PAI teachers not only serve as educators but also as role models and builders of the school culture, maintaining continuity between formal learning and character practice within the school environment [40], [41], [42]. The implications of these findings emphasize that character development is more effective when the teacher's role is supported by a school ecosystem that provides value routines, spaces for actualization, and consistent guidance, ensuring that character internalization is not situational but becomes a stable habit in student.

Supporting and Hindering Factors in Character Development by PAI Teachers

The findings of this study indicate that the supporting factors for character development in students at SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah rely on a conducive school environment, consistency in religious programs, and relatively harmonious communication between PAI teachers and students. School support is evident through the continuity of structured religious activities and the availability of worship facilities that assist in the routine implementation of character development [43], [44], [45]. The communicative teacher-student relationship also strengthens the effectiveness of character building, as teachers are able to function as behavioral guides and value reinforcers in a more responsive manner [46].

However, this study emphasizes dominant barriers originating from external factors, especially the social environment outside the school, negative exposure to social media, and weak parental control over students' behavior [47]. Another obstacle that influences this is the limited PAI learning time, which means that character development cannot always be intensively carried out during class hours [48], [49], [50]. Implicationally, these findings suggest that character development cannot solely rely on classroom interventions but requires reinforcement across spaces through collaboration between the school and family, more systematic monitoring, and the use of technology-based media strategies so that external influences do not undermine the values that have been built at school [51], [52], [53], [54].

Discussion

This study affirms that the character development of students in vocational schools cannot be understood as the result of a single pedagogical action standing alone, but rather as an ecological process influenced by the interconnected roles of teachers, school culture, and external conditions [55]. The findings indicate that character education through PAI is more effective when values are not only conveyed as concepts but are instilled through structured and repeated mechanisms in the school life [56]. This position aligns with the literature on character education, which places habituation and school culture as key to the success of value internalization, as students tend to absorb character more easily through consistent experiences than through momentary normative instruction [57].

At the level of teacher roles, the findings strengthen the argument that PAI teachers play a strategic function as value guides and behavioral mentors, not limited to delivering content. Several previous studies also affirm that PAI teachers act as moral educators, role models, and mentors who have a strong influence on the formation of students' morals and character at school [58]. Thus, this study is consistent with the trend in research that places the teacher figure as the main actor in character development, especially through the role modeling seen in everyday interactions. However, an important distinction in this study is the emphasis that the teacher's role is ineffective without the support of an institutional ecosystem that enables values to be applied as a collective practice, rather than just a personal message.

The findings of this study also affirm that religious habituation functions as a character-strengthening instrument that works through routines and repetition [28]. This is consistent with various studies showing that structured religious activities in schools, such as communal worship and habituation of Qur'an reading, contribute to strengthening discipline, responsibility, and the formation of positive habits in students [59]. Analytically, religious habituation becomes effective because it transforms values into collective actions that can be observed, so character does not remain just knowledge [60]. The academic implication of this is that character education is more stable when values are developed in the form of routines that bind the entire school community, not just as individual tasks for students.

In addition to habituation, the findings of this study show that character development is reinforced through organizational spaces and extracurricular activities as arenas for training leadership, cooperation, and social care [61]. These findings are relevant to research on character education in vocational schools, which emphasizes the importance of school culture and student activities in building social responsibility as well as readiness to face the challenges of adolescence and the workforce [62]. Critically, organizational activities can be understood as spaces for social learning that train character through real-life experiences, not merely advice [63]. Therefore, this study strengthens the view that PAI-based character education will have a greater impact when supported by spaces for actualization that allow students to practice values in complex social situations [64].

In terms of supporting factors, the findings of this study show that the success of character development is influenced by the school's structural support and the quality of teacher-student relationships [65]. This aligns with studies on positive school culture, which emphasize that consistent programs, supportive facilities, and a healthy communication climate make the internalization of values more effective [66]. In this context, communicative teacher-student relationships not only facilitate learning but also serve as a medium for character development

because they allow for behavioral correction and value reinforcement in a more responsive manner [67], [68]. Thus, the findings of this study affirm that character education requires institutional support and the quality of pedagogical relationships, not just the firmness of rules.

Conversely, the findings of this study show that the main obstacles to character development stem from external factors that are difficult for the school to control, particularly the social environment outside the school, negative exposure to social media, and weak parental control. Literature on the challenges of character education in the digital era also emphasizes that social media can be an obstructing factor as it promotes impulsive behavior, decreases study discipline, and increases the risk of imitating negative behaviors when family supervision is low [69], [70]. This study clarifies that the main issue is not only the absence of school programs but the lack of continuity in values between the school and the home, leading to a conflict of values. As a consequence, character development at school may weaken when students return to a social environment that does not support the same values [71], [72].

Overall, this discussion reinforces that the findings of this study strengthen the model of the teacher's role and the ecological factors of character development as a more comprehensive explanation of the successes and limitations of character education in vocational schools. This model is in line with character education literature, which places the school as the center of value cultivation, while also emphasizing that the sustainability of character is highly dependent on the support of the family and the social environment [73], [74]. The practical implication of this study is the need for a cross-space strategy: the school should maintain religious habituation and reinforce student organizations while building intensive collaboration with parents and strengthening digital literacy to reduce the negative impacts of social media.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that character development in students at SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah occurs through the role of the PAI teacher, which goes beyond delivering content but also extends to guiding values and fostering school culture. The findings indicate that character strengthening becomes more effective when PAI values are integrated into learning and reinforced through consistent religious habituation and spaces for student actualization in organizational and extracurricular activities. This pattern emphasizes that character education does not stop at normative understanding but is formed through repeated experiences that allow students to practice discipline, responsibility, leadership, and social care within the school context.

On the other hand, the study concludes that the effectiveness of character development is heavily influenced by ecological factors that either support or hinder the process of value internalization. School support, facilities, and teacher-student communication serve as major enablers, while dominant obstacles arise from external school influences, negative exposure to social media, and weak parental control, which may create a disconnect in values between school and home. Therefore, the findings of this study highlight that sustainable character development requires an ecosystem-based strategy, which involves strengthening learning and habituation practices in schools while building active collaboration with families and enhancing

digital literacy, so that character building is not situational but becomes stable as a culture inherent in students' behavior.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations, including the fact that it was only conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Terusan Nunyai Lampung Tengah, so the findings may not be fully generalizable to other vocational schools with different student characteristics and environments. Additionally, this study relied on data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation, which may have been influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher and limitations in access to certain information or school activities. Another limitation is that this study did not quantitatively measure the direct impact of PAI and Character Education on the long-term development of students' character, so the findings are more descriptive and do not provide a deeper understanding of the long-term effectiveness of the character-building strategies implemented.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

DS contributed to the conceptualization and design of the research, data collection, data analysis, and the preparation of the initial manuscript draft. SN provided a critical review of the manuscript, offered in-depth analytical insights, and assisted in the final revision process. AD was involved in data collection, literature review, statistical analysis, and the development of the article structure. AM assisted with data collection, participated in the analysis, and contributed ideas to the discussion and conclusion sections. SA was responsible for developing the research methodology, processing the data, and improving the language and structure of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

Artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. AI-based language models were employed to assist in language improvement, including grammar correction, text clarity, and writing style enhancement. However, all intellectual contributions, including conceptualization, data analysis, and conclusions, were entirely carried out by the authors. The use of AI was limited to improving the language quality and writing, and did not contribute to the development of research ideas, methodology, or research findings. We affirm that the use of AI has not affected the originality, academic integrity, or authenticity of this work.

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