

Investigating Islamic Education Teachers as Role Models in Character Formation and Professional Ethics

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Abstract: Teachers' professional ethics have long been recognized as a cornerstone of character education; however, empirical evidence explaining how Islamic Education (PAI) teachers enact ethical professionalism as role models in shaping primary school students' character remains limited. This study explores the role of PAI teachers as ethical role models and examines the factors that support and constrain the enactment of professional ethics in primary school settings. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research was conducted across several primary schools, with PAI teachers serving as the primary participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis and analyzed using an iterative thematic approach. The findings demonstrate that teachers' ethical professionalism, reflected in honesty, fairness, discipline, empathy, and consistency between words and actions, plays a central role in facilitating the internalization of students' character values through everyday classroom interactions and school culture. Nevertheless, the enactment of these ethical practices is constrained by excessive administrative responsibilities, limited opportunities for continuous professional development, and insufficient value-based supervisory mechanisms. These findings suggest that strengthening teachers' professional ethics requires not only individual commitment but also institutional support that integrates professional learning, ethical leadership, and reflective supervision. The study contributes to the growing literature on teacher professionalism by demonstrating that ethical role modelling constitutes a fundamental mechanism through which character education is translated into authentic educational practice in primary schools.

Keywords: character education; Islamic education teachers; professional ethics; teacher professional ethics

Abstrak: Etika profesional guru merupakan salah satu fondasi penting dalam penguatan pendidikan karakter, namun kajian empiris mengenai bagaimana guru Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) mengaktualisasikan etika profesional sebagai teladan dalam membentuk karakter peserta didik sekolah dasar masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran guru PAI sebagai figur keteladanan etis serta mengidentifikasi faktor pendukung dan penghambat dalam penerapan etika profesional untuk penguatan karakter siswa sekolah dasar. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus yang dilaksanakan pada beberapa sekolah dasar, dengan guru PAI sebagai informan utama. Data dikumpulkan melalui

wawancara mendalam, observasi pembelajaran, dan analisis dokumen, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan tematik secara iteratif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keteladanan guru PAI melalui praktik kejujuran, keadilan, kedisiplinan, kepedulian, serta konsistensi antara ucapan dan tindakan berperan penting dalam proses internalisasi nilai karakter siswa melalui interaksi pembelajaran dan budaya sekolah. Namun demikian, implementasi etika profesional guru masih menghadapi berbagai tantangan, seperti tingginya beban administratif, keterbatasan program pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan, dan belum optimalnya sistem supervisi berbasis nilai. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa penguatan peran guru PAI sebagai teladan karakter tidak hanya bergantung pada komitmen personal guru, tetapi juga membutuhkan dukungan kelembagaan melalui pengembangan profesional, kepemimpinan etis, dan supervisi reflektif. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kajian profesionalisme guru dengan menunjukkan bahwa keteladanan etis merupakan mekanisme penting dalam mentransformasikan pendidikan karakter dari konsep normatif menjadi praktik pendidikan yang autentik di sekolah dasar.

Katakunci: etika profesional guru; guru pendidikan agama Islam; pendidikan karakter; keteladanan guru

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a critical concern in responding to the moral and social challenges emerging in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world (Jaedun et al., 2024). In educational contexts, character formation represents one of the fundamental missions of schooling, particularly at the elementary level, where children begin to internalize basic values, attitudes, and moral orientations that influence their future development (Lestari et al., 2024). At this developmental stage, students do not only acquire knowledge through classroom instruction but also construct values through observation, interaction, and experiences within their educational environment. Therefore, teachers occupy a strategic position as agents of moral development who influence students not only through instructional processes but also through their personal conduct and daily behaviors as role models (Afifah & Khamidi, 2022). Ramadhani et al. (2025) emphasize that teachers who consistently demonstrate values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and empathy have a stronger influence on students' character formation compared with teachers who merely deliver verbal explanations of moral values.

Within this context, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers hold a distinctive responsibility because their role extends beyond transmitting religious knowledge to embodying the ethical principles they teach. Islamic education emphasizes the integration between knowledge, faith, and practice, where educators are expected to represent Islamic values through their attitudes, interactions, and professional conduct. The concept of *uswatun hasanah* in Islam highlights that exemplary behavior is one of the most effective forms of education and moral guidance. Accordingly, the role modeling practices of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers, both in classroom activities and broader school interactions, become an important mechanism in shaping students' Islamic character (Utami et al., 2023). Through consistent examples of ethical behavior, teachers provide students with concrete representations of religious and moral values in everyday life.

Previous studies have demonstrated the significant contribution of teacher role modeling to character education. Nuronja & Jannah (2025) found that teachers whose behaviors consistently reflect the values they teach are more capable of strengthening students' understanding and internalization of moral principles. Similarly, Asyha et al. (2025) highlighted that teachers' professional ethics influence students' trust and contribute to the effectiveness of character education processes. However, existing studies tend to emphasize conceptual discussions of teacher exemplary behavior or investigate students' perceptions of teachers rather than

examining how Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers practically construct and negotiate role modeling through their professional practices. Furthermore, contextual investigations regarding the challenges faced by PAI teachers, including work pressure, administrative responsibilities, and limited opportunities for professional ethics development, remain insufficiently explored.

This limitation indicates an important research gap concerning how professional ethics are translated into everyday practices by Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers and how these practices contribute to elementary students' character formation. Understanding teacher role modeling requires not only examining the values that teachers promote but also exploring the social, institutional, and professional contexts that shape their ability to consistently embody those values. Therefore, empirical studies that investigate teachers' lived experiences, ethical practices, and contextual challenges are necessary to provide a more comprehensive understanding of character education implementation at the elementary school level.

Based on this research gap, this study aims to explore the implementation of role modeling practices among Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers in shaping elementary students' character from the perspective of professional ethics. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, this research seeks to understand how PAI teachers practice ethical values, respond to professional challenges, and influence students' character development through their daily interactions and educational practices. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of character education discourse and practically to strengthening teacher professionalism, particularly in Islamic education contexts where educators are positioned as both knowledge transmitters and moral exemplars.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character education remains a critical issue in elementary schools, particularly in fostering students' responsibility and moral values as a foundation for their personal and social development (Awalia et al., 2024). The formation of students' character requires consistent and systematic strategies, with teachers playing a multidimensional role as role models, facilitators, motivators, and guides in internalizing values through modeling behavior, habituation practices, and integration into classroom instruction (Hadi et al., 2025). The concept of role modeling is grounded in social learning theory, which posits that individuals learn ethical behavior through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Teachers, as significant others in students' lives, serve as central agents in cultivating a culture of integrity, emphasizing the need to lead by example and uphold school-wide standards (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). This perspective underscores that teachers influence students' moral development through their actions and the ethical climate they help create in schools (Lickona, 1991).

Professional ethics provide the moral framework that guides teachers' conduct and decision-making. The code of ethics serves as the foundation of moral ethics for teachers to carry out their duties professionally. According to the literature, a code of ethics is needed to protect the profession, control disagreements, protect practitioners, and protect clients professionally from unlawful practices. Studies on professional ethics emphasize that ethical teaching involves more than following rules; it requires moral sensitivity, moral consideration, moral motivation, and moral action (Campbell, 2008). The development of teacher competence has traditionally focused only on pedagogical skills, while the construction of professional ethics remains neglected (Hoyle, 2001). The lack of "ethical language" or moral vocabulary in education makes it difficult for teachers to recognize, articulate, and communicate about the moral complexity and teaching ethics they face. Research on the role of codes of ethics for teachers reveals that consistent application helps teachers maintain their integrity, improve relationships with students, and set a good example in everyday life (Zaky, 2025). Increasing understanding and implementing a good code of ethics is very necessary to realize quality education that is beneficial for students' spiritual and moral development (Jamaludin et al., 2025).

In the Indonesian context, the professional code of ethics for teachers is guided by the Indonesian Teachers Pledge established at the XVI Congress in 1989, which emphasizes teachers' commitment to upholding the code of ethics as a guideline for professional conduct (Awalia et al., 2024). The concept of *uswatun hasanah* (exemplary behavior) is central to Islamic education and provides the theological foundation for teacher role modeling. Rasulullah SAW is described as successful in becoming a *uswatun hasanah* (good leader and role model) (Marimba, 1962). Research on prophetic values in school leadership has identified four main values in Muhammadiyah schools in Yogyakarta: adopting a collegial collective leadership system, being based on faith, being oriented towards the quality of progressing schools, and applying *ta'awun* (cooperation) (Hasanah et al., 2025).

In the context of digital technology, the exemplary conduct of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) teachers becomes a strategic element in shaping students' religious and moral character (Badriyah, 2025). The literature confirms that teacher role modeling is the most effective method for instilling spiritual, moral, and social values, because students more easily internalize values through concrete examples rather than verbal instruction. Teacher role modeling has been proven to strengthen religious character, digital moral literacy, and students' social behavior. Recent studies on Islamic character education through *uswatun hasanah* emphasize that strengthening teachers' spiritual competence, personality, and digital ethics is essential to face the challenges of the technological era. The integration of teacher role modeling with constructivist approaches in PAI learning produces a more transformative learning process compared to normative approaches alone.

Recent empirical studies have examined teacher role modeling across various educational contexts. A systematic literature review on the role of teachers in shaping responsible character in elementary schools found that teachers play multidimensional roles as role models, facilitators, motivators, and guides (Badriyah, 2025). The effectiveness of character formation is strengthened by the synergy between school environments and parental involvement, emphasizing that consistent and reflective teacher engagement contributes significantly to the development of responsible character in students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Research on Islamic character education strengthening through *uswatun hasanah* and religious maturity found that teacher role modeling serves as a central pedagogical instrument in the process of internalizing values through habituation and meaningful social interaction. A narrative review of articles published between 2015-2025 revealed that the constructivist approach strengthens the effectiveness of role modeling by encouraging active participation, value reflection, and contextual learning (Badriyah, 2025). Studies on teacher professional ethics in Indonesia have focused on developing instruments to measure elementary school teachers' professional ethics, highlighting the need for standardized assessment tools to evaluate teachers' ethical conduct (Awalia et al., 2024). Research also confirms that teachers' standpoints toward promoting academic uprightness include personal commitment to integrity, fostering student accountability, and the role of the school environment (Jamaludin et al., 2025). Research on prophetic values in school leadership demonstrates the relevance of the *uswatun hasanah* concept in contemporary educational contexts, with implementation rates reaching 92.9% in some Muhammadiyah schools in Yogyakarta.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore comprehensively how Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers construct and demonstrate role modeling practices in shaping students' character within the context of elementary education. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to understand educational phenomena through participants' experiences, meanings, and social interactions within their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Meanwhile, the

case study design was considered appropriate because this research aimed to investigate contemporary educational practices in depth and within their real-life contexts, particularly regarding how teachers' exemplary behaviors contribute to students' character formation (Yin, 2018).

The research was conducted in several elementary schools located in Lareh Sago Halaban Subdistrict, Lima Puluh Kota Regency, Indonesia. This research context was selected because Islamic Religious Education teachers in these schools play a strategic role in integrating Islamic values, professional ethics, and character education into daily learning practices. The focus of the study was to examine teachers' exemplary behaviors, consistency in implementing professional ethics, and their contribution to students' moral and character development.

The participants consisted of three Islamic Religious Education teachers selected through purposive sampling. In qualitative research, purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who possess relevant knowledge, experience, and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015).

Table 1: Informant Profile

No	Name	Gender	Description	School Location
1	Nurlela	Female	PAI teacher with a high commitment to developing students' character through role modeling	UPTD SDN 02 Labuah Gunuang, Lareh Sago Halaban Subdistrict
2	Alhusni Fuad	Male	PAI teacher known as a disciplined educator who consistently applies the values of honesty and responsibility	UPTD SDN 01 Labuah Gunuang, Lareh Sago Halaban Subdistrict
3	Ermaneti	Female	PAI teacher with expertise in building empathetic relationships with students and applying fairness in learning	UPTD SDN 03 Sitanang, Lareh Sago Halaban Subdistrict

The criteria for participant selection included: (1) having a minimum of five years of teaching experience, (2) actively implementing character education based on Islamic values, and (3) demonstrating commitment to professional teaching ethics and students' moral development. These criteria ensured that participants could provide rich and meaningful information related to teacher role modeling practices.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with PAI teachers to explore their understanding, experiences, and reflections regarding teacher role modeling, professional ethics, and strategies for cultivating students' character. Second, participant observations were conducted to examine teacher-student interactions, classroom practices, and teachers' daily behaviors both inside and outside the classroom. Observation was used to capture authentic manifestations of character values through teachers' actions and interactions. Third, document analysis was conducted by examining relevant documents, including teacher reflection records, professional ethics guidelines, school activity archives, and other documents related to character education.

Data analysis followed the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the analysis process, interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary data were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns and thematic categories related to teacher role modeling and

character formation. The researchers conducted continuous comparison among the collected data to develop deeper interpretations and ensure that emerging themes were grounded in empirical evidence (Miles et al., 2014).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, this study applied methodological triangulation by comparing data obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary sources. Triangulation was employed to enhance credibility by ensuring consistency and convergence among different sources of evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, the study considered four criteria of qualitative trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical principles were maintained throughout the research process by obtaining participants' consent, protecting participants' confidentiality, and using the collected data solely for academic purposes

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Exemplary Values Demonstrated by PAI Teachers

The study found that PAI teachers consistently demonstrate five core values in their daily interactions with students: honesty, discipline, fairness, responsibility, and empathy. These values were observed not only during formal teaching hours but also during recess, extracurricular activities, and informal conversations with students. The consistency with which teachers displayed these values across different settings was a key factor in their effectiveness as role models. Honesty emerged as the most fundamental value according to all three informants. Teachers reported that honesty is the foundation of trust between educators and students. Without trust, character education cannot proceed effectively. One teacher stated, *"I try not just to tell the children to be honest, but to set an example myself"* (Nurlela, Interview, 2025). Observations confirmed that this teacher consistently demonstrated honesty by admitting when she made a mistake, returning excess change when buying items at the school canteen, and being transparent about grading criteria with students. Students in her class were observed to be more willing to admit their own mistakes compared to students in other classes.

Discipline and punctuality were predominantly demonstrated through daily routines. Mr. Alhusni Fuad, a PAI teacher at UPTD SDN 01 Labuah Gunuang, explained his philosophy on discipline: *"I cannot just tell students to behave well—I have to set the example. If I arrive late, I apologize to the students"* (Interview, 2025). Field observations noted that Mr. Fuad arrived at school at least fifteen minutes before the first bell every day. He used this time to prepare his lessons and greet students as they arrived. When a rare circumstance caused him to be late due to a flat tire, he publicly apologized to his class and explained the reason. Following this incident, students became more punctual in submitting assignments and arriving to class on time. Document analysis of attendance records showed that Mr. Fuad's class had the highest attendance rate and the fewest late arrivals in the school. Fairness was another crucial value demonstrated by teachers. One teacher explained, *"I do not differentiate between smart and less smart students. Everyone has the same chance to speak and to be appreciated"* (Ermaneti, Interview, 2025). Observations revealed that this teacher called on students evenly during class discussions, gave equal attention to high-achieving and low-achieving students, and avoided favoritism when assigning classroom responsibilities. When conflicts arose between students, she listened to both sides before making a decision. Students reported feeling safe and valued because they knew they would be treated fairly regardless of their academic performance or family background.

Responsibility was shown through consistent completion of professional duties. Teachers prepared lesson plans on time, graded assignments within reasonable timeframes, and followed up on student absences by contacting parents. Document analysis of teacher record books showed detailed notes on student progress, including remedial actions taken for struggling students and

enrichment activities for advanced learners. One teacher kept a log of students who missed prayers and personally mentored them to improve their religious practice. This level of responsibility extended beyond classroom walls; teachers participated in school events, attended parent-teacher meetings, and volunteered for extracurricular supervision without complaint.

Empathy and respect were demonstrated through daily interactions with students. Teachers greeted students warmly every morning, asked about their well-being, and showed genuine concern when students appeared distressed. During observations, one teacher noticed a student sitting alone during recess and approached him to ask if something was wrong. The student eventually confided that he was being teased by older students. The teacher addressed the issue immediately by speaking with the older students and arranging a mediation session. The student later told his parents that his teacher "really cares about me." Such empathetic behavior built strong emotional connections between teachers and students, which facilitated the internalization of character values.

Application of Professional Ethics by PAI Teachers

Professional ethics serve as the foundation that guides teachers' behavior and decision-making in carrying out their duties. The study identified several key aspects of professional ethics implemented by PAI teachers, including integrity, confidentiality, adherence to the professional code of ethics, and consistency between words and actions. Integrity was demonstrated through honest reporting of student progress, fair grading practices, and refusal to engage in unethical behavior such as accepting bribes for grades. One teacher explained that parents had occasionally offered gifts or money in exchange for special treatment for their children. She refused every time, stating, *"My integrity is more important than any gift. If I compromise once, I lose my credibility forever"* (Nurlela, Interview, 2025). This teacher was respected by parents and colleagues alike for her unwavering principles. Maintaining student confidentiality emerged as an important aspect of professional ethics that was generally well understood by teachers. One teacher stated, *"I never discuss my students' problems with other teachers unless it is for their benefit"* (Fuad, Interview, 2025). However, document analysis showed that the school had no formal written guidelines on confidentiality, leaving implementation to individual teacher discretion. This lack of formal policy created inconsistency across different classrooms. Some teachers were careful to protect student privacy, while others discussed sensitive student information in teachers' lounges where others could overhear. This finding suggests the need for school-wide policies on confidentiality.

Adherence to the professional code of ethics was claimed by all three informants, but their actual understanding varied significantly. One teacher admitted, *"I know the rules in general, but I have never attended specific training on the code of ethics"* (Nurlela, Interview, 2025). Another teacher could only name three of the eight principles in the professional code of ethics when asked during an interview. This gap between declarative knowledge and practical application indicates that current teacher preparation and ongoing professional development may not adequately address professional ethics. Teachers reported that their pre-service training covered ethics briefly in one or two sessions, with no follow-up or reinforcement during their careers. Consistency between words and actions was identified as the most influential factor in effective role modeling. Teachers whose daily behavior aligned with their teachings were significantly more effective in shaping student character than those who merely gave verbal advice. One teacher reflected on this principle: *"Students watch me more than they listen to me. If I say one thing and do another, they will lose trust"* (Ermaneti, Interview, 2025). Observations confirmed this statement. In classrooms where teachers demonstrated consistency, students were more attentive, more respectful, and more likely to internalize the values being taught. In contrast, classrooms where teachers displayed inconsistency between words and actions showed higher rates of student misbehavior and lower levels of respect for the teacher.

Despite good intentions and understanding of professional ethics, teachers faced significant internal and external barriers to consistent implementation. One teacher expressed frustration: *"Sometimes we know the rules, but work pressure and workload make it difficult to stay*

consistent" (Ermaneti, Interview, 2025). Another teacher added, *"I know how important it is to maintain ethical standards, but sometimes administrative burdens and pressure to meet targets make it hard to stay focused"* (Fuad, Interview, 2025). These statements highlight the reality that professional ethics do not operate in a vacuum. They are implemented within a specific institutional context that can either support or undermine ethical behavior. When teachers are overwhelmed with paperwork, standardized testing requirements, and administrative demands, their capacity to focus on ethical role modeling is reduced.

Impact of Teacher Role Modeling on Students' Character Development

The study revealed that teachers' exemplary behavior had direct, observable, and measurable effects on students' attitudes, behaviors, and character development. These effects were documented through classroom observations, teacher reports, and analysis of student behavior records. Increased trust and respect for teachers was the most immediate impact observed. Students demonstrated higher levels of trust toward teachers who consistently modeled positive values. In classrooms where teachers were honest and fair, students were more willing to admit mistakes, apologize for misbehavior, and follow classroom rules voluntarily rather than out of fear of punishment. One teacher noted, *"My students know that I will not punish them unfairly for admitting a mistake. Because of this, they come to me when they have problems instead of hiding them"* (Fuad, Interview, 2025). This trust accelerated the character formation process because students were receptive to their teacher's guidance rather than resistant.

The internalization of honesty was demonstrated through specific student behaviors that directly mirrored teacher actions. One teacher shared a meaningful example during an interview: *"Last week, a student found a pen and immediately returned it to me. When I asked why, she said, 'Because you always return things that don't belong to you.' That was a proud moment"* (Nurlela, Interview, 2025). This example illustrates how teacher behavior directly shapes student conduct through imitation and internalization. The student had observed her teacher's consistent honesty over time and had adopted that value as her own. Similar examples were reported by all three informants, suggesting that this pattern is not isolated but rather a predictable outcome of consistent role modeling.

Improved discipline was documented through analysis of attendance records and behavioral logs. Classes with disciplined teachers showed higher student attendance rates, fewer late arrivals, and fewer disciplinary referrals to the principal's office compared to classes with less disciplined teachers. Teachers reported that verbal reminders about punctuality were significantly more effective when accompanied by personal example. One teacher explained, *"When I arrive on time every day, students stop making excuses about traffic or waking up late. They see that I also have to travel to school, but I manage to be on time"* (Ermaneti, Interview, 2025). This finding suggests that role modeling may be more effective than verbal instruction alone in teaching discipline.

The development of empathy was observed in classrooms where teachers consistently demonstrated empathetic behavior. Students in these classes were observed helping classmates in difficulty, sharing food with peers who forgot their lunch, comforting sad friends, and standing up for students who were being teased. One teacher noted, *"They learn to care because they see me caring every day. I cannot force them to be empathetic, but I can show them what empathy looks like"* (Fuad, Interview, 2025). Observations confirmed that students in these classrooms spontaneously engaged in prosocial behaviors without being prompted by teachers, indicating genuine internalization of empathetic values.

A positive and cooperative classroom climate emerged in schools with PAI teachers who consistently upheld professional ethics. Students felt safe expressing their opinions, asking questions, and making mistakes because they knew they would not be ridiculed or punished unfairly. Teachers reported spending less time on behavior management and more time on instruction because students were cooperative and respectful. One teacher summarized, *"When I treat my students with respect, they treat me and each other with respect. The whole classroom*

atmosphere becomes positive, and learning happens more easily" (Nurlela, Interview, 2025). This finding highlights that teacher role modeling benefits not only character education but also academic outcomes by creating conditions conducive to learning.

Challenges in Implementing Role Modeling and Professional Ethics

Despite the positive impacts documented above, the study identified several significant challenges that hinder teachers from consistently serving as role models. These challenges are structural, personal, and systemic in nature, and addressing them will require intervention at multiple levels. High administrative workload was cited by all three informants as the most pressing challenge. Teachers reported that excessive administrative duties reduce the time available for meaningful interaction with students. One teacher explained, *"I spend more time filling out forms and reports than actually talking to my students. How can I be a role model if I am always at my desk?"* (Ermaneti, Interview, 2025). Document analysis revealed that teachers spent an average of twelve hours per week on administrative tasks unrelated to direct instruction. These tasks included completing lesson plan templates, filling out attendance reports, documenting student progress in multiple formats, preparing assessment materials, and attending coordination meetings. This administrative burden left teachers exhausted and with less emotional energy for the demanding work of character role modeling.

Limited ongoing training on professional ethics was another significant challenge. None of the three teachers had received specific training on professional ethics or character role modeling within the last two years. The existing training programs offered by the school district focused almost exclusively on pedagogical techniques, curriculum updates, assessment methods, and technology integration. One teacher stated with frustration, *"We are told to be good examples, but we are never taught how, especially under pressure"* (Fuad, Interview, 2025). Another teacher added, *"Professional ethics was covered briefly in my pre-service training years ago, but there has been no refresher since then"* (Nurlela, Interview, 2025). This lack of ongoing training means that teachers are expected to serve as moral exemplars without the necessary knowledge, skills, or support.

Weak value-based supervision systems were identified through document analysis and interviews. Supervision conducted by school principals or district supervisors focused almost exclusively on administrative completeness—lesson plans, attendance lists, grade books, and assessment reports. The moral, ethical, and exemplary dimensions of teaching were rarely, if ever, evaluated. One teacher noted, *"No one ever observes whether I am honest or fair. They only check my files"* (Nurlela, Interview, 2025). Another teacher confirmed, *"My supervisor has never asked me about how I handle ethical dilemmas or how I model values to students. The focus is always on paperwork"* (Ermaneti, Interview, 2025). This narrow focus of supervision sends an implicit message that administrative compliance is more important than ethical conduct, undermining efforts to strengthen teacher role modeling.

Low moral awareness and commitment among some teachers was also identified as a challenge. While the three informants themselves demonstrated strong commitment, they acknowledged that not all colleagues shared this dedication. One informant admitted, *"Some of my colleagues think teaching is just delivering material. They forget that students watch everything they do"* (Ermaneti, Interview, 2025). Teachers with low moral awareness may arrive late, leave early, speak disrespectfully to students or colleagues, fail to keep promises, or engage in favoritism. Such behavior damages students' trust not only in that particular teacher but potentially in teachers as a whole. Addressing this challenge requires not only training but also accountability mechanisms that address ethical violations.

The mismatch between character ideals and classroom reality was the final challenge identified. The study found that ideal character values often conflicted with real-life pressures and constraints. For example, a teacher might want to be fair but feels pressured by school administration to give higher grades to children of influential parents. Another teacher might want to be honest but fears administrative consequences for reporting a problem accurately. One

teacher summarized this tension: "We know the ideals, but the system does not always support us. Sometimes we have to choose between doing the right thing and keeping our jobs" (Fuad, Interview, 2025). This mismatch creates moral distress for teachers and can lead to burnout or disengagement over time. Addressing this challenge requires systemic changes that align institutional incentives with ethical ideals.

Discussion

The finding that PAI teachers consistently demonstrate honesty, discipline, fairness, responsibility, and empathy in their daily interactions strongly supports the theoretical framework that positions teachers as central agents of moral development. This finding aligns with the work of Afifah & Khamidi (2022), who argued that teachers play a key role as primary agents of moral development not only through formal instruction but also by serving as role models through their daily attitudes and behavior. The current study extends this understanding by providing concrete, observable examples of how teachers demonstrate these values across different settings, including the classroom, recess, and informal interactions.

The concept of *uswatun hasanah* (exemplary behavior) in Islam, as discussed by Utami et al. (2023), emphasizes that the most powerful form of preaching and education is through exemplary behavior. The current study provides empirical support for this concept by demonstrating that students internalize values more effectively when they observe their teachers consistently practicing those values. One teacher's statement that a student returned a lost pen because "you always return things that don't belong to you" perfectly illustrates how *uswatun hasanah* operates in practice. The student did not merely hear about honesty; she witnessed it repeatedly and eventually adopted it as her own value.

The finding regarding the importance of consistency between words and actions supports the work of Nuronisa & Jannah (2025), who found that teachers whose behavior aligns consistently with the values they teach can enhance students' understanding of moral concepts. The current study goes beyond this finding by demonstrating that consistency also affects students' trust in teachers and their willingness to follow teacher guidance. When teachers demonstrated consistency, students were more receptive to character education; when inconsistency was present, students became resistant or skeptical. This finding has important implications for teacher preparation and professional development, suggesting that training programs should emphasize not only what values to teach but also how to live those values consistently.

The finding that fairness in treating all students without favoritism fosters a democratic and inclusive classroom climate supports the work of Ramadhani et al. (2025), who stated that teachers who consistently show values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and empathy are more effective in shaping students' character than merely giving verbal advice. The current study adds to this understanding by documenting the specific mechanisms through which fairness operates. When teachers treat students fairly, students feel safe and valued, which in turn makes them more open to learning and internalizing character values. Conversely, when teachers show favoritism, students become distrustful and may reject the teacher's moral guidance entirely.

Empathy emerged as a particularly important value in the current study, which is consistent with the findings of Asyha et al. (2025) that teachers' professional ethics influence students' trust and the effectiveness of character education. The observation that students in classrooms with empathetic teachers spontaneously engaged in prosocial behaviors helping classmates, sharing food, comforting sad friends demonstrates that empathy can be modeled and internalized. This finding suggests that teacher empathy is not merely a nice-to-have quality but an essential component of effective character education. Students learn to care by seeing care modeled, and this learning translates into concrete behaviors that benefit the entire school community.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the persistent gap between teachers' understanding of professional ethics and their actual implementation in daily practice. All three teachers claimed familiarity with the professional code of ethics, yet none had received specific

training on ethics within the last two years, and their ability to articulate the principles of the code varied significantly. This finding supports the work of Zajuli & Darmiyanti (2023), who noted that while most teachers understand the importance of maintaining ethical standards, work pressure and workload make it difficult to stay consistent. The current study extends this finding by documenting the specific ways in which this gap manifests, including through inconsistent application of confidentiality, difficulty maintaining integrity under pressure, and the absence of formal school policies on ethical conduct.

The finding that teachers face significant barriers to consistent ethical implementation, including heavy administrative workloads and limited ongoing training, aligns with the work of Fauzi (2018), who argued that without consistent ethical practice, a teacher's image and credibility in the eyes of students may decline, ultimately hindering the character-building process. The current study provides empirical evidence for this claim by demonstrating that students in classrooms with teachers who displayed inconsistency showed higher rates of misbehavior and lower levels of respect. This finding has important implications for school administration and educational policy, suggesting that efforts to strengthen character education must address not only teacher training but also the structural conditions that make consistent ethical practice difficult.

The finding that supervision systems focus almost exclusively on administrative completeness rather than ethical conduct is particularly concerning. This finding supports the work of Kurniawan (2017), who argued that supervision systems should prioritize ethical dimensions and teacher integrity rather than focusing solely on administrative aspects. The current study adds to this understanding by documenting the consequences of narrow supervision. When teachers perceive that only paperwork matters, they allocate their time and energy accordingly, often at the expense of the relational and ethical work that is essential for character education. One teacher's statement that "no one ever observes whether I am honest or fair" reflects a systemic failure to prioritize what matters most in education.

The finding that low moral awareness and commitment exist among some teachers, even if not among the informants themselves, highlights the need for accountability mechanisms. As noted by Sianipar & Irawati (2022), a lack of understanding of the teacher's moral role as a role model leads some educators to fall short in fully committing to professional ethics. The current study suggests that addressing this issue requires not only training but also clear expectations, regular feedback, and consequences for ethical violations. Without such accountability, teachers with low moral awareness may continue to serve as poor role models, potentially damaging students' character development and undermining the efforts of their more ethical colleagues.

The finding that teacher role modeling has direct, observable effects on student character development is consistent with the work of Joni & Lubis (2022), who argued that teacher professionalism includes pedagogical, social, personal, and professional competencies, all of which play vital roles in supporting character education. The current study adds to this understanding by documenting specific student outcomes associated with teacher role modeling, including increased trust, honesty, discipline, empathy, and respect. These outcomes were not merely reported by teachers but were observed during classroom observations and documented through analysis of attendance records and behavioral logs.

The finding that students internalize honesty through imitation of teacher behavior provides empirical support for the concept of the hidden curriculum. As noted by Apriliani et al. (2024), the hidden curriculum implicitly conveys moral and social values through daily interactions, attitudes, and teacher behavior, in addition to explicit teaching through the subject. The current study demonstrates that the hidden curriculum may be more powerful than explicit instruction in shaping student character. One teacher's story about a student returning a lost pen because the teacher always returns lost items perfectly illustrates how the hidden curriculum operates. The student learned honesty not from a lesson about honesty but from observing honest behavior repeatedly over time.

The finding that students in classrooms with disciplined teachers showed higher attendance rates and fewer disciplinary referrals supports the work of Zahra & Fathoni, (2024) , who argued that the consistency between a teacher's words and actions significantly impacts students' internalization of values. The current study extends this finding by providing quantitative evidence of this impact through document analysis. The fact that one teacher's class had the highest attendance rate and fewest late arrivals in the school suggests that teacher discipline directly influences student discipline. This finding has practical implications for school improvement efforts, suggesting that interventions aimed at improving student behavior should begin by examining and strengthening teacher role modeling.

The development of empathy as a result of teacher role modeling is particularly noteworthy because empathy is often considered difficult to teach through explicit instruction. The finding that students in classrooms with empathetic teachers spontaneously engaged in prosocial behaviors supports the work of Hamidah & Hasanah, (2024), who argued that teachers who continuously develop themselves through training and reflection become vital assets in shaping students' character in ways that apply to the demands of the times. The current study adds to this understanding by demonstrating that empathy can be effectively modeled, and that this modeling results in concrete prosocial behaviors that benefit the entire school community. This finding has important implications for teacher preparation, suggesting that programs should place greater emphasis on developing teachers' emotional intelligence and empathy skills.

The five challenges identified in this study heavy administrative workload, limited ongoing training, weak value-based supervision systems, low moral awareness among some teachers, and mismatch between ideals and reality are interconnected and require systemic solutions. As noted by Wau (2022), individual effort alone cannot strengthen the role of teachers as role models in character education; it requires systemic support from various stakeholders, including educational institutions, the government, and the wider community.

The finding that heavy administrative workload reduces time for meaningful interaction with students supports the work of Zajuli & Darmiyanti (2023), who found that excessive administrative duties reduce the time teachers have to build personal relationships with students and to demonstrate direct role modeling. The current study adds to this understanding by quantifying this burden twelve hours per week on administrative tasks unrelated to direct instruction and by documenting teacher frustration with this allocation of time. One teacher's statement that "I spend more time filling out forms and reports than actually talking to my students" reflects a profound misalignment between educational priorities and the actual demands placed on teachers. Addressing this issue requires a fundamental rethinking of what teachers are asked to do and how their time is allocated.

The finding that limited ongoing training on professional ethics leaves teachers unprepared for the moral dimensions of their work supports the work of Choliq et al. (2025), who argued that policies promoting recognition, consistent enforcement of the professional code of ethics, and assessments based on moral values will enhance teachers' motivation to uphold professionalism. The current study extends this finding by documenting the specific gaps in current training programs, which focus almost exclusively on technical aspects of teaching while neglecting the ethical and moral dimensions. One teacher's statement that "we are told to be good examples, but we are never taught how" highlights a critical failure in teacher professional development. Addressing this issue requires the development and implementation of training programs that explicitly address professional ethics, moral reasoning, and strategies for maintaining integrity under pressure.

The finding that weak value-based supervision systems fail to support ethical teacher conduct supports the work of Kurniawan (2017), who argued that the supervision system should prioritize ethical dimensions and teacher integrity rather than focusing solely on administrative aspects. The current study adds to this understanding by documenting the consequences of this narrow focus. When teachers perceive that only administrative compliance matters, they allocate

their time and energy accordingly, and the ethical dimensions of teaching are neglected. One teacher's statement that "no one ever observes whether I am honest or fair" reflects a system that has lost sight of what matters most in education. Addressing this issue requires redefining the purpose and focus of supervision to include regular observation and feedback on teachers' ethical conduct and role modeling.

The finding that low moral awareness among some teachers undermines character education efforts is particularly challenging because it involves changing attitudes and beliefs, not just behaviors. As noted by Rosmi et al. (2021), teachers must uphold key components of professional ethics, such as fairness, honesty, responsibility, and maintaining student confidentiality. The current study suggests that not all teachers internalize this responsibility. Some view teaching as merely delivering material rather than as a moral enterprise. Changing this mindset requires not only training but also the creation of a school culture that explicitly values and rewards ethical conduct. It may also require the development of accountability mechanisms that address ethical violations, up to and including removal from the profession for serious or repeated violations.

The finding that there is a persistent mismatch between character ideals and classroom reality is perhaps the most sobering finding of this study. Teachers know what they should do, but systemic pressures pressure from administrators, pressure from parents, pressure to meet standardized testing targets often push them in the opposite direction. One teacher's statement that "sometimes we have to choose between doing the right thing and keeping our jobs" reflects a profound moral distress that, if left unaddressed, can lead to burnout, disengagement, and attrition from the profession. Addressing this mismatch requires systemic changes that align institutional incentives with ethical ideals. This may include revising assessment and accountability systems, providing teachers with greater autonomy and professional discretion, and creating safe channels for reporting ethical concerns without fear of retaliation.

The findings of this study have several important implications for educational policy and practice. First, teacher preparation and ongoing professional development programs must place greater emphasis on professional ethics and character role modeling. As argued by Hamidah & Hasanah (2024), teachers who continuously develop themselves through training and reflection become vital assets in shaping students' character. The current study suggests that current programs are inadequate, with teachers receiving little to no training on ethics after entering the profession. Policymakers should require that teacher preparation programs include substantial coursework on professional ethics, and that ongoing professional development includes regular ethics training and reflection.

Second, supervision systems must be reformed to prioritize ethical conduct alongside administrative compliance. As noted by Kurniawan (2017), the supervision system should prioritize ethical dimensions and teacher integrity. The current study suggests that current systems fail in this regard, focusing almost exclusively on paperwork. School administrators should be trained to observe and provide feedback on teachers' ethical conduct, including fairness, honesty, respect for students, and consistency between words and actions. Supervision reports should include an assessment of these ethical dimensions, and teachers should receive regular feedback on their performance as role models.

Third, schools must create cultures that support integrity and ethical conduct. As argued by Choliq et al. (2025), synergy between schools, the government, and the community will create an educational environment that fully supports the effective implementation of teacher role modeling. The current study suggests that individual teacher effort is insufficient; teachers need the active support of school administrators, colleagues, parents, and the wider community. This support can take many forms, including public recognition of teachers who demonstrate exemplary ethical conduct, protection for teachers who report ethical concerns, and clear consequences for ethical violations.

Fourth, administrative workload must be reduced to free up time for the relational work that is essential for character education. The finding that teachers spend twelve hours per week on administrative tasks unrelated to direct instruction is unacceptable. Policymakers should review and streamline reporting requirements, eliminate redundant or unnecessary paperwork, and provide adequate administrative support so that teachers can focus on teaching and role modeling. As one teacher stated, "How can I be a role model if I am always at my desk?" This question deserves a serious answer from educational leaders at all levels.

Finally, the mismatch between character ideals and classroom reality must be addressed through systemic changes that align institutional incentives with ethical ideals. This is perhaps the most challenging implication because it requires changes to deeply embedded structures and practices. However, the current study suggests that without such changes, efforts to strengthen teacher role modeling will have limited success. Teachers cannot be expected to consistently model ethical values if the system in which they work consistently punishes them for doing so.

CONCLUSION

Teachers play a fundamental role in shaping students' character, especially through role modeling that is reflected in the application of professional ethics and professional conduct. The findings of this study indicate that the real-life behavior of teachers both in the classroom and in social interactions outside of it has a direct impact on the internalization of moral values by students. Teachers' role modeling serves as an effective medium for instilling values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, and empathy in learners. However, this strategic role still faces various challenges, both structural and personal. High administrative workloads, limited ongoing training on professional ethics, and weak value-based supervision systems are among the factors that hinder teachers from consistently fulfilling their role as moral exemplars. To strengthen the role of teachers in character education, several strategic steps are recommended. First, organizers must arrange continuous training programs with a specific focus on strengthening professional ethics and character education. Second, the educational supervision system should direct its focus not only to assessing administrative tasks but also to evaluating teachers' moral, ethical, and exemplary behavior. Third, more holistic educational policy support is essential namely, by integrating the evaluation of teachers' character and integrity into the overall performance appraisal system. With such systemic support, teachers should fulfill their role as role models optimally and sustainably, thus significantly contributing to shaping a generation with strong character and high integrity.

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