



Classroom Teachers as Moral Role Models for Elementary Aged Children: Reconstructing Uswah Ḥasanah in Light of Moral Exemplarism and Moral Development Theory

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ABSTRACT

Teacher exemplarity is widely recognised as a pillar of character education, and within the Islamic educational tradition it is articulated through the concept of *uswah ḥasanah*. However, the literature on *uswah ḥasanah* has long been dominated by a normative-descriptive frame that asserts the imperative for teachers to serve as exemplars without explaining the mechanism of moral emulation or the conditions of its success. This study aims to reconstruct *uswah ḥasanah* as a dimension of the professional character of madrasah ibtidaiyah classroom teachers. It is a conceptual study of the theory-adaptation type, conducted through library research and employing a comparative-integrative technique that brings *uswah ḥasanah* into dialogue with moral exemplarism and moral development theory across predetermined dimensions. The analysis reveals that *uswah ḥasanah* contains an implicit affective architecture admiration driving emulation through narrative and that the effectiveness of exemplarity depends on its attainability for young children. The reconstruction yields an integrated five-component construct: the teacher's character as a concrete moral referent, the evocation of admiration that drives emulation, the mediation between paradigmatic and proximal exemplars, the reflective management of exemplary narrative, and the calibration of exemplar attainability. This positions the classroom teacher as a proximal exemplar mediating the prophetic ideal, rendering exemplarity a developable competence rather than an assumed trait. Its novelty lies in bridging the Islamic tradition of exemplarity with contemporary moral exemplarism, with implications for professional development and prospective-teacher formation.

Keywords: *uswah ḥasanah*; teacher exemplarity; teacher professional character; moral exemplarism; madrasah ibtidaiyah.

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1. Introduction

Efforts to cultivate character have now shifted to the digital realm, for example through digital role-play-based learning media designed to help students internalize character traits ; this shift highlights and simultaneously risks eroding the central role of teachers as direct role models. Character education at the elementary school and madrasah ibtidaiyah levels relies heavily on the teacher as a role model whom students

can directly emulate in their daily lives (Saputra et al., 2024). In the tradition of Islamic education, this role is defined through the concept of *uswah ḥasanah* that is, virtuous exemplary behavior rooted in Quranic Surah al-Aḥzāb, verse 21 and is believed to be the most influential method in shaping students' habits, attitudes, and actions (Sanusi et al., 2024). Within this framework, teachers are not merely conveyors of material but inheritors of the prophetic function, whose exemplary conduct must begin with themselves (Sanusi et al., 2024).

The belief that setting a good example is the most effective means of character development is not unique to Islamic tradition. Empirical studies in Indonesia confirm that the internalization of character values occurs most strongly through teachers' exemplary behavior, as students tend to imitate the behavior they consistently observe (Rifki et al., 2023). A similar argument has emerged in contemporary moral philosophy through the theory of moral exemplarism, which positions exemplary figures rather than abstract rules as the primary reference point for moral concepts. Zagzebski (2017) asserts that humans recognize moral goodness through the emotion of admiration for exemplary figures, which simultaneously motivates the desire to emulate them. This view positions role modeling as one of the most fundamental sources of moral education (Kristjánsson, 2006). This convergence between *uswah ḥasanah* and exemplarism seems to reinforce the assumption that the presence of a good role model inherently leads to good imitation.

This assumption finds a strong psychological foundation precisely during the early childhood years. Social learning theory explains that children shape their behavior through observation and imitation of significant role models in their environment, and classroom teachers, who accompany children throughout the day, serve as highly influential role models (Bandura, 1977). Consistent with this, children's moral reasoning at this stage is still heteronomous and relies on authority and concrete examples set by adults, rather than on abstract, principled reasoning (Piaget, 1932). In other words, it is at this level that the mechanism of modeling operates most intensively; thus, the moral qualities of elementary school teachers carry a weight in character formation that far exceeds their role at higher educational levels, as is also evident in the finding that elementary school students directly emulate their teachers' attitudes (Saputra et al., 2024).

However, the long-held belief in the effectiveness of role modeling is now being challenged by recent empirical findings that suggest the mechanisms of moral imitation are far more fragile and conditional than previously assumed. Experimental research has found that exemplary figures who are extraordinary and seem out of reach are actually less effective than role models who are perceived as attainable and relatable to learners' lives (Han et al., 2017). Follow-up studies confirm that relatability is a key predictor of moral elevation, whereas role models placed on an overly high pedestal risk failing to inspire emulation (Han & Dawson, 2024). Kristjánsson (2017) even noted that the emotions evoked by role models namely admiration, emulation, and moral elevation are not identical and do not always lead to imitation; thus, the presentation of an inappropriate role model can trigger passive admiration or even withdrawal. These findings overturn the naive logic of role modeling, as the presence of a great role model does not automatically lead to imitation and, under certain conditions, can actually be counterproductive.

This is where the unresolved tension lies. On the one hand, the literature on *uswah ḥasanah* in Indonesia, although rich and continuously evolving, tends to remain at a normative-descriptive level that is, it emphasizes the necessity for teachers to serve as role models without explaining the psychological mechanisms of imitation, and it positions students as passive recipients of values rather than highlighting the self-formation of teachers as active agents (Sanusi et al., 2024). On the other hand, the literature on exemplarism which offers mechanistic explanations alongside a critical awareness of the attainability of role models has developed within a secular framework and has not yet been linked to the concept of *uswah ḥasanah* or to the context of elementary madrasahs (Han & Graham, 2024). As a result, the issue of the accessibility of role models which is highly relevant when the Prophet and teachers are positioned as ideal figures for children is almost never discussed in the discourse on Islamic role modeling. It is this gap that leaves an untapped conceptual space: the reconstruction of *uswah ḥasanah* capable of explaining how role modeling works, why it can fail, and how it should be designed for elementary-aged children.

Building on this gap, this article offers a conceptual reconstruction of *uswah ḥasanah* by critically bringing it into dialogue with moral exemplarism and moral development theory. Rather than treating exemplary behavior as a method merely applied to students, this article positions *uswah ḥasanah* as a dimension of the professional character of elementary madrasah teachers that is, a personal competency that must be cultivated rather than merely mandated. Through this convergence, the Islamic concept of exemplary behavior gains a mechanistic explanation regarding the roles of admiration and emulation (L. Zagzebski, 2013), as well as a critical sensitivity to the risks of exemplary behavior that may be out of reach for young learners (Kristjánsson, 2017). The novelty of this article lies in bridging two previously separate discourses, as well as in sharpening its relevance to the elementary school age group the most critical window for children's moral development (Bandura, 1977).

Based on the above discussion, this study aims to answer four key questions. First, how is the concept of *uswah ḥasanah* constructed within the tradition of Islamic education, and where do the limitations of its articulation lie in contemporary literature? Second, how do moral exemplarism and moral development theory explain the mechanisms and conditions for the success of moral exemplarity among elementary-aged children? Third, how does a critical engagement between the two lead to a reconstruction of *uswah ḥasanah* as a dimension of the professional character of elementary madrasah teachers? Fourth, what implications does this reconstruction have for the professional development and character formation of prospective elementary madrasah teachers?

2. Methods

This study is a literature review designed as a conceptual study. As a literature review, the entire data collection process relies on written materials through a series of activities involving reading, note-taking, and analyzing literature, without the need for field data collection (Zed, 2004). To avoid getting bogged down in a loose literature review, this study specifically defines its design as a conceptual study of the “theory adaptation” type that is, a design that borrows a theoretical framework from one field to reinterpret and reconstruct concepts in another field (Jaakkola, 2020). In this context, the framework of moral exemplarism and the theory of moral development are borrowed to reconstruct the concept of *uswah ḥasanah* as a dimension of the professional character of elementary madrasah teachers. The approach used is qualitative in nature, with a descriptive-analytical and comparative character, as this study does not stop at merely presenting concepts but rather brings together, compares, and synthesizes two traditions of thought which have historically developed separately into a single, coherent conceptual framework.

Data sources are clearly distinguished into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include texts that form the basis of the concept of *uswah ḥasanah*, particularly verses from the Qur'an that serve as references for exemplary behavior (QS al-Aḥzāb: 21), along with classical works of Islamic pedagogy that discuss this concept and major works on moral exemplarism, specifically Exemplarist Moral Theory (L. T. Zagzebski, 2017). Secondary sources include scientific journal articles, books, and the latest research findings on exemplary conduct, character education, and moral development, including critical studies on the attainability of exemplary models (Kristjánsson, 2017). To ensure the validity of the data, this study employs source triangulation cross-referencing various documents so that findings do not rely on a single source; as emphasized, document analysis underscores the importance of triangulation and systematic evaluation to support credibility and theory-building (Bowen, 2009). Validity is also established through the criteria of credibility and dependability, as is customary in qualitative inquiry, accompanied by referential adequacy and consistency of interpretation across sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis was conducted through content analysis combined with comparative-integrative analysis. In the first stage, content analysis was used to systematically read the texts and interpret the meanings of the concepts of *uswah ḥasanah*, exemplarism, and moral development in the context of their usage, since content analysis treats data as communication that must be interpreted as text within its social context of use, rather than merely as physical events to be counted (Krippendorff, 2013). These documents were examined through

a document analysis procedure that combines content examination with interpretation namely, selecting, understanding, and synthesizing relevant data from various written materials (Bowen, 2009). In the second stage, findings from both traditions were brought together through a comparative-integrative analysis of several predefined dimensions: the foundation of moral reference, the affective mechanisms driving emulation, the role of exemplary narratives, the risks or dark side of exemplary behavior, and their implications for teachers' self-formation highlighting both points of convergence and divergence within each dimension. The final stage consists of a conceptual synthesis, namely the reformulation of *uswah ḥasanah* as a framework for the professional character of elementary madrasah teachers, in accordance with the logic of theoretical adaptation, which demands the creation of new concepts rather than merely a summary of the literature (Jaakkola, 2020).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Teachers as Role Models and *Uswah Ḥasanah* in Contemporary Character Education Literature

A review of the latest literature indicates that teacher modeling plays a central role in character education at the elementary level. A cross-program synthesis of character education studies found that interventions grounded in behavioral modeling and the teacher–student relational climate produce measurable impacts on character development, although the magnitude of these effects varies across contexts (Brown et al., 2023). These findings are consistent with studies at the preschool and elementary school levels that position teachers as models of everyday behavior who serve as direct role models for children (Birhan et al., 2021). More specifically, teachers' personalities and personal exemplary conduct have been identified as reinforcing factors in character education that cannot be replaced by instructional materials (Lukman et al., 2021). This body of findings reveals a convergent pattern: teachers are reported to function not merely as conveyors of values, but as sources of values to be emulated.

In Islamic educational literature, the centrality of exemplary conduct is articulated through the concept of *uswah ḥasanah*. Conceptual studies position teachers not only as *mu'allim* who transfer knowledge, but also as *mu'addib* that is, educators who serve as prototypes of faith and moral character by exemplifying prophetic values in their attitudes and actions (Sanusi et al., 2024). A similar orientation is evident in recent studies that specifically highlight Islamic education teachers as role models in shaping students' character and professional ethics (Judrah & Arjum, 2024). consistent with findings that religious education teachers view character development as the core of their professional responsibility (Metcalf & Moulin-Stožek, 2021). The literature on *uswah ḥasanah* also consistently links teachers' exemplary conduct to the formation of students' attitudes and habits at the elementary level (Sanusi et al., 2024). Thus, the concept of figure-based exemplary conduct in the Islamic tradition resonates with broader findings regarding the teacher's role as a moral model.

At the same time, a review of the literature on *uswah ḥasanah* reveals one prominent characteristic: an orientation dominated by a normative-descriptive framework. The available studies generally emphasize the necessity for teachers to serve as role models and outline the theoretical foundations for this, while explanations of the psychological processes that underpin moral imitation are relatively rarely discussed (Sanusi et al., 2024). The focus of discussion also tends to center on students as recipients of values, whereas the self-development of teachers as moral agents an aspect that requires further attention receives less emphasis (Sanusi et al., 2024). This pattern aligns with findings that the success of character education depends heavily on teachers' personal readiness and quality a dimension that demands special attention (Birhan et al., 2021; Lukman et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the review reveals that the mechanisms and prerequisites for the success of role modeling have not been extensively discussed in the literature on Islamic role modeling. Meanwhile, studies in the field of moral education report that the effectiveness of role modeling is not automatic but depends on certain psychological and pedagogical conditions (Han & Graham, 2024). In line with this, a synthesis of character education programs notes a wide range of impacts across interventions, indicating that the presence of role models does not in itself guarantee uniform results (Brown et al., 2023). These findings point to an area of

discussion that has not yet been fully explored, particularly regarding how role modeling works and under what conditions it is effective.

Overall, the findings at this stage can be summarized in three points. First, teachers' exemplary behavior has been confirmed as the cornerstone of character education, both in general literature and in the concept of *uswah ḥasanah*. Second, the literature on *uswah ḥasanah* is strong from a normative perspective but limited in its mechanistic explanations and focus on teachers' self-development. Third, the conditions for the success of exemplary behavior including factors such as accessibility and children's developmental stages have been identified as areas requiring further study. These three findings form the basis for the discussion in subsection 3.2 on the affective mechanisms of exemplary behavior and subsection 3.3 on exemplary behavior within the developmental window of elementary-aged children, before all three will be analytically synthesized in subsection 3.4.

Table 1. Literature Review on Exemplary Behavior (*Uswah ḥasanah*): Topics That Have and Have Not Been Discussed

Aspect	This has been discussed in the literature	It hasn't been discussed much yet	References
The central role of teachers as role models	Teachers are the primary moral role models, especially at the elementary level		Brown et al. (2023); Birhan et al. (2021)
The Foundation of Uswah Ḥasanah	Exemplary conduct as a theological imperative (mu'addib, prophetic value)	How does mimicry work psychologically?	Sanusi et al. (2024); Metcalfe & Moulin-Stožek (2021)
The affective mechanism of imitation		The Roles of Admiration, Emulation, and Elevation	Han & Graham (2024)
The Key to Success		Conditions that Make Role Models Effective or Ineffective	Brown et al. (2023); Han & Graham (2024)
Teachers as moral agents	Guru wajib berkarakter baik	Teacher self-development as a professional competency	Sanusi et al. (2024); Lukman et al. (2021)

3.2 The Affective Mechanism of Moral Exemplarism in the Study of Moral Exemplarism

The theory of moral exemplarism posits admiration as the emotion that serves as the cornerstone of the entire mechanism of exemplarity. According to this framework, humans identify moral goodness not primarily through reasoning about abstract principles, but through direct reference to individuals admired for their virtues (L. T. Zagzebski, 2017). Admiration is understood not as a passive response, but as an emotion that contains a driving force; namely, it evokes a desire to become like the admired figure; this admiration emulation model is commonly attributed to Zagzebski's work on the theory of moral exemplarism. This approach is reported to have revitalized interdisciplinary interest in exemplarity and emulation in moral education over the past decade (Brooks et al., 2021). A number of studies confirm that introducing virtues through exemplary figures is one of the most promising pathways for character development, as it links moral values to concrete examples rather than abstract concepts (Kristjánsson, 2006). Thus, this literature positions admiration for role models as the primary entry point for virtue education.

Further research refines this understanding by showing that affective responses to role models are not uniform. Kristjánsson (2017) carefully distinguishes three emotions that are often conflated: admiration for a person's virtue, emulation as an active drive to achieve similar virtue, and elevation as a feeling of being uplifted upon witnessing noble moral goodness. This distinction corrects the assumption that admiration automatically leads to imitation; in many cases, admiration remains merely an appreciation without prompting action. In recent developments, emulation has even been argued to be a moral virtue in its own right that requires cultivation, rather than a side effect that arises spontaneously (Henderson, 2023). This perspective

complements the early formulation of exemplarism, which links the impulse to emulate as an intrinsic element of admiration for exemplars (L. Zagzebski, 2013). Findings in this area confirm that the mechanism of exemplarity has a layered internal structure, and its success depends on a person's transition from mere admiration to active emulation.

The same literature highlights the role of narrative as a vehicle that brings the mechanism of admiration to life. Moral exemplars are reported not to function in the abstract, but rather through stories that concretely present the figure's virtues, thereby evoking an affective response in learners (Brooks et al., 2021). Biographical narratives are considered capable of linking the empirical dimension of exemplary behavior with what the figure actually did with its normative dimension, namely the values to be emulated (L. Zagzebski, 2013). However, research also notes that presenting role models through narratives is not a neutral process; every instance of presenting a role model for admiration is simultaneously an act of persuasion that requires pedagogical caution. Some theorists emphasize that a role model-based approach requires educators to present models that are truly emulatable while simultaneously fostering students' capacity for critical reflection, so as to avoid falling into indoctrination (Croce, 2020). Thus, the literature views narratives as a powerful component that nonetheless demands careful management.

The findings with the strongest empirical support relate to the criteria for role model attainability. A series of experimental studies reported that moral role models perceived as attainable and relatable to learners' lives are more effective at fostering prosocial engagement than role models portrayed as extraordinary and difficult to emulate (Han et al., 2017). Follow-up studies reinforce these findings by demonstrating that relatedness and attainability are key predictors of moral elevation and positive affective experiences, which in turn support the motivation to imitate (Han & Dawson, 2024). In line with this direction, some theoretical studies have broadened the scope of role models to include not only distant, idealized figures but also imperfect role models who can still be realistically emulated (Croce, 2020). This literature consistently shows that the distance between the role model and the learner is a determining variable: role models who are perceived as too lofty and detached from everyday life risk being difficult to emulate, while role models who are close and accessible tend to be more grounded pedagogically.

In addition to these convergent findings, the literature also documents an ongoing debate. A number of scholars have questioned exemplarism's excessive emphasis on admiration, arguing that this approach prioritizes empirical considerations over its normative foundations (Carr, 2023). Other critics point out that role models who are distant in terms of context, age, or culture can hinder learners from acquiring the virtues exemplified, and that closeness to a role model can also give rise to negative emotions such as envy or shame. This debate has spurred a number of attempts at revision, including a shift from a focus on extraordinary role models toward more diverse and ordinary sources of moral inspiration (Croce, 2020). Nevertheless, scholars generally remain in agreement on the basic premise that exemplarism is one of the most effective pathways in the formation of virtues (Brooks et al., 2021). This historical record of the debate shows that the effectiveness of exemplarity is not considered a settled matter but rather depends on a number of conditions that are still being examined.

Based on this discussion, the findings regarding the mechanism dimension can be summarized into four points. First, admiration is the emotion that serves as the primary driver of role modeling (L. T. Zagzebski, 2017). Second, responses to role models are multi-layered, divided into admiration, emulation, and elevation, and only some of these lead to active imitation (L. T. Zagzebski, 2017). Third, narratives serve as the primary vehicle for evoking admiration while also requiring reflective management (Brooks et al., 2021). Fourth, the effectiveness of role models depends on their accessibility to learners (Han & Dawson, 2024). These four findings are presented as documented in the literature and will be compared with findings regarding children's developmental stages in subsection 3.3.

before both are analyzed synthetically in subsection 3.4. The four elements identified above narrative, admiration, emulation, and elevation do not operate in isolation but form an interconnected affective architecture, as visualised in Figure 1.

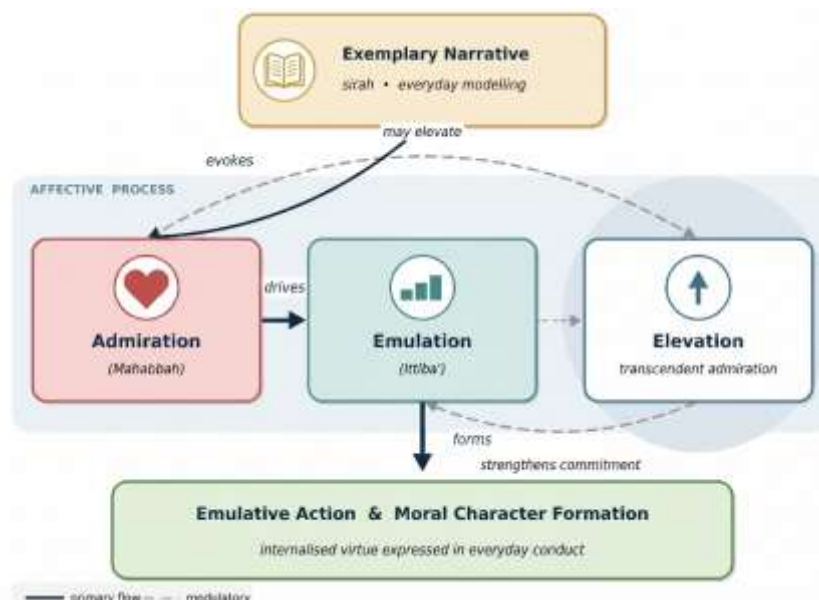


Figure 1. The affective architecture of moral exemplarity: narrative evokes admiration that drives emulation, with elevation as a modulatory response

Figure 1 makes explicit two features that the *uswah hasanah* literature has left implicit: narrative operates as the vehicle that ignites admiration, and elevation functions as a reinforcing rather than a substituting response admiration must translate into emulation for exemplarity to bear on conduct. Table 2 then differentiates these three affective responses in greater detail.

Table 2. Three affective responses to moral exemplars in the study of exemplarism

Emotions	Brief definition	The Role of Leading by Example	References
<i>Admiration</i>	An affective response to a virtue observed in a person	Identifying role models and sparking initial motivation	Zagzebski (2017); Kristjánsson (2017)
<i>Emulation</i>	An active drive to achieve similar excellence	Fostering genuine emulation; a virtue that needs to be cultivated	Henderson (2023); Kristjánsson (2017)
<i>Elevation</i>	It's uplifting to witness such noble moral goodness	Strengthening our commitment to moral ideals	Kristjánsson (2017); Han & Dawson (2024)

3.3 Role Modeling in the Development of Young Children

Developmental research identifies observation and imitation as one of the most fundamental learning mechanisms in childhood. Social learning theory explains that children acquire behavioral patterns including moral behavior through observation of significant models in their environment, rather than solely through verbal instruction (Bandura, 1977). Recent developmental findings reinforce this picture by showing that imitation is not merely mechanical repetition, but rather a means by which children absorb social rules and conventions from the adults around them. Experimental studies have found that young children tend to selectively imitate models whose behaviors align with social norms and conventions (Oláh & Király, 2019). Even as early as the preschool years, social learning strategies such as imitation and selective trust develop rapidly and become the primary pathway through which children acquire knowledge and behaviors from others (Schütte et al., 2020). This body of evidence confirms that, during the early childhood years, learning through observed models is the dominant mode of development.

The nature of children's moral reasoning at this age also helps explain why modeling behavior is so influential. Within the classical framework of moral development, children's reasoning in the early stages is heteronomous that is, it relies on adult authority and concrete rules rather than on abstract principled reasoning (Piaget, 1932). Contemporary research updates this picture by emphasizing that moral development begins

early and is constructed by children through daily social interactions; thus, moral understanding grows from the experience of interacting with and observing others' behavior, rather than from doctrines taught in isolation (Dahl, 2019). In other words, children's early morality is shaped relationally and situationally. These findings indicate that concrete examples of behavior present in daily life have a greater formative influence on young children than abstract explanations of values (Dahl, 2019).

The developmental literature also consistently reports that children's imitation is not indiscriminate but rather selective. Children tend to choose models based on a number of cues, particularly the model's competence and reliability. Young children learn selectively from others based on the accuracy and reliability demonstrated by previous models, and use this information to predict who will provide the most accurate and useful information (Schütte et al., 2020). Children are also more willing to imitate models whose behavior aligns with social norms than those who deviate from them (Oláh & Király, 2019). Even between the ages of four and six, children increasingly prioritize epistemic cues such as the credibility and reliability of a model's knowledge over purely social characteristics when determining whom they trust. This body of findings indicates that the effectiveness of a role model for children depends on the children's perceptions of the model's credibility and closeness (Oláh & Király, 2019; Schütte et al., 2020).

In the school setting, teachers serve as one of the closest and most consistently present role models in the daily lives of elementary-aged children. Studies on character education at the preschool and elementary school levels have found that character development relies heavily on teachers serving as role models figures whose behavior children directly observe and imitate (Birhan et al., 2021). Studies in the context of Indonesian elementary schools have also documented that students emulate teachers' attitudes and habits in daily interactions, meaning that teachers' role modeling plays a key role in shaping character traits such as discipline (Saputra et al., 2024). These findings position classroom teachers who interact with children nearly all day as models characterized by high intensity and closeness, two conditions that, according to developmental literature, actually increase the likelihood of imitation (Schütte et al., 2020). The convergence of these three developmental conditions observational learning, concrete moral reasoning, and selective imitation and their bearing on the classroom teacher's mediating position is summarised in Figure 2.

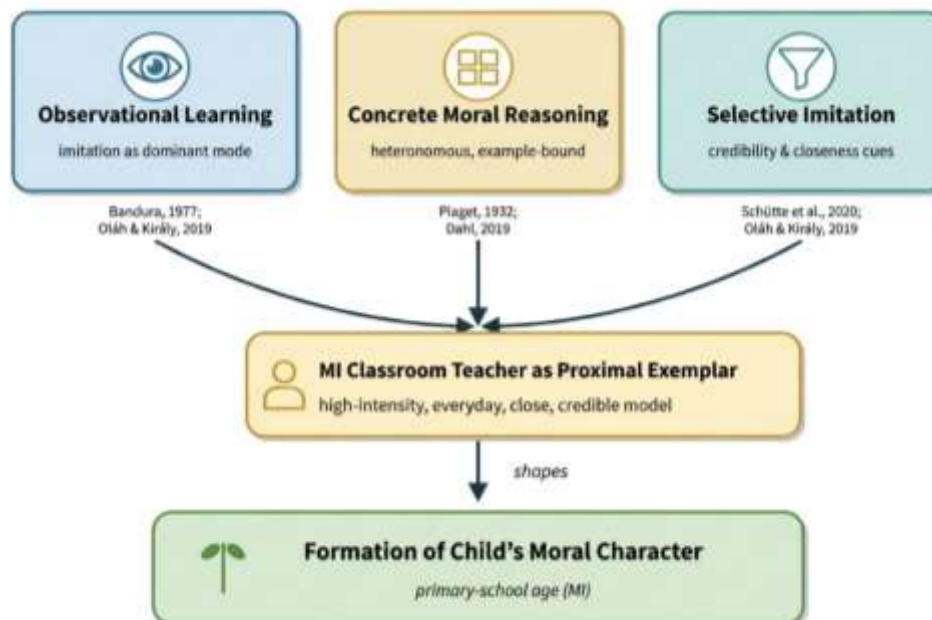


Figure 2. The developmental window of the primary-school-age child: three converging conditions that position the MI classroom teacher as a proximal exemplar.

As Figure 2 shows, the three developmental conditions converge on a single implication: the model who is close, concrete, and credible in the child's daily environment carries the greatest formative weight. The findings regarding this developmental dimension therefore overlap with the findings on the attainability of role models presented in the previous subsection. Research shows that role models perceived as close and

accessible are more effective at motivating behavior than those who seem distant and impossible to emulate (Han et al., 2017), and relatedness is an important predictor of the affective responses that support imitation (Han & Dawson, 2024). The characteristics of young children, whose moral reasoning relies on concrete examples (Piaget, 1932) and who selectively imitate credible and accessible models (Schütte et al., 2020), align with the finding that accessible role models are more effective. Thus, the developmental literature and the literature on role model accessibility point in a convergent direction: at the early childhood stage, models who are close, concrete, and credible have the greatest moral shaping power.

Based on the above discussion, the findings regarding the developmental dimension can be summarized into three points. First, during early childhood, learning through observation and imitation of models is the dominant mode of development (Bandura, 1977; Oláh & Király, 2019). Second, children's moral reasoning at this stage relies on concrete examples and social interactions, rather than on abstract principles (Dahl, 2019; Piaget, 1932). Third, children's imitation is selective and sensitive to the model's credibility and closeness (Schütte et al., 2020). These three findings complement those in subsections 3.1 and 3.2, and all three will be analytically synthesized in subsection 3.4 to formulate a reconstruction of *uswah ḥasanah* as a dimension of the professional character of elementary madrasah teachers.

3.4 Reconstructing Uswah Ḥasanah as a Dimension of Professional Character for Elementary Madrasah Teachers

When the three groups of findings in Section 3 are brought together, a productive tension emerges. On the one hand, the literature on *uswah ḥasanah* positions exemplary behavior as a normative imperative directed at students as recipients of values (Sanusi et al., 2024). On the other hand, findings regarding affective mechanisms and developmental windows actually indicate that the determining variable is not the moral message conveyed, but rather the teacher's own character as an object of admiration and a model for imitation (Schütte et al., 2020; L. T. Zagzebski, 2017). When these two perspectives are compared, it becomes clear that the traditional view, which treats *uswah ḥasanah* as a "method" applied to students, is inadequate. This article therefore argues that *uswah ḥasanah* is more appropriately understood as a dimension of a teacher's professional character that is, a quality inherent in the educator as a subject, rather than a technique applied to an object.

This argument rests primarily on the logic of the mechanism. Since exemplary behavior works through admiration that inspires emulation, and since moral concepts in this framework refer directly to the exemplary individual rather than to abstract rules (L. T. Zagzebski, 2017), the true pedagogical tool is the teacher's actual character, not the material they teach. Teachers, in this sense, are the "text" that children read every day. This shift aligns with developments in the professional literature, which increasingly emphasize that ethical and moral dimensions are not merely supplementary attributes but rather the core of the teacher's professional identity itself as underscored by the fact that a teacher's professional identity and the moral dimensions of their work are becoming increasingly central issues in contemporary society (Buxarra, 2021). Studies on teacher professionalism even position the capacity for reflection on one's moral role as a core component of the profession that can withstand future demands (Cramer et al., 2023). Thus, viewing *uswah ḥasanah* as a professional character competency is not a forced broadening of meaning, but rather a logical consequence of how exemplary behavior functions.

The second argument is based on the mediating function revealed by developmental analysis. In the *uswah ḥasanah* tradition, the paradigmatic role model is the Prophet Muhammad a figure who, in the terminology of role-model studies, is "distant" from children in contextual, historical, and cultural terms. In fact, findings indicate that effective role models for young learners are precisely those who are close, concrete, and accessible (Croce, 2020; Han et al., 2017), while elementary-aged children selectively imitate models they perceive as credible and close (Schütte et al., 2020). It is this tension between the distant ideal role model and children's need for a close model that places the classroom teacher in a unique functional position: the teacher serves as a proximal role model who bridges the highest moral ideals with the concrete, everyday experience of imitation. Elementary school teachers do not replace the Prophet as a role model but rather serve as

intermediaries who make the prophetic example accessible, imitable, and livable by children in concrete forms. It is this mediating function that constitutes a conceptual contribution not found in previous formulations of *uswah ḥasanah*.

Based on these two arguments, *uswah ḥasanah* can be reconstructed as a professional character construct comprising several interrelated dimensions. This reconstruction summarizes the results of a comparative-integrative analysis of the five dimensions that form the framework of this study, as summarized in Table 3. This construct links the normative aspects that have long been central to Islamic tradition with the mechanistic and developmental aspects that have been absent until now, so that exemplary conduct is no longer merely a recommendation but becomes a competency for which indicators can be formulated and which can be systematically cultivated in line with the demand that a teacher's character be viewed as an integral part of developed professionalism, rather than one that is merely assumed (Cramer et al., 2023; Metcalfe & Moulin-Stožek, 2021).

Table 3. Reconstruction of *uswah ḥasanah* as a dimension of professional character for MI classroom teachers

Dimensions	Old (normative) formulation	Reconstruction (Professional Characteristics)	Framework	Basis for the findings
Moral Foundations	Teachers must follow the Prophet's example	A teacher's character serves as a concrete moral example that children look up to		Zagzebski (2017)
Affective mechanisms	Setting a good example fosters good character	Teachers inspire admiration that spurs emulation		Kristjánsson (2017); Han & Dawson (2024)
Mediation functions	(not specified)	Teachers as proximal role models who serve as the ideal bridge to the prophetic tradition		Han et al. (2017); Schütte et al. (2020)
Narrative-reflective function	The teacher shared an inspiring story	Teachers manage the narrative of exemplary behavior in a reflective, rather than indoctrinatory, manner		Brooks et al. (2021); Croce (2020)
Affordability Awareness	(not specified)	The teacher adjusts the distance of the demonstration so that the children can still reach it		Croce (2020); Carr (2023)

The causal relationship among these components from the paradigmatic examples provided by the classroom teacher to the development of the children's moral character is illustrated in Figure 3.

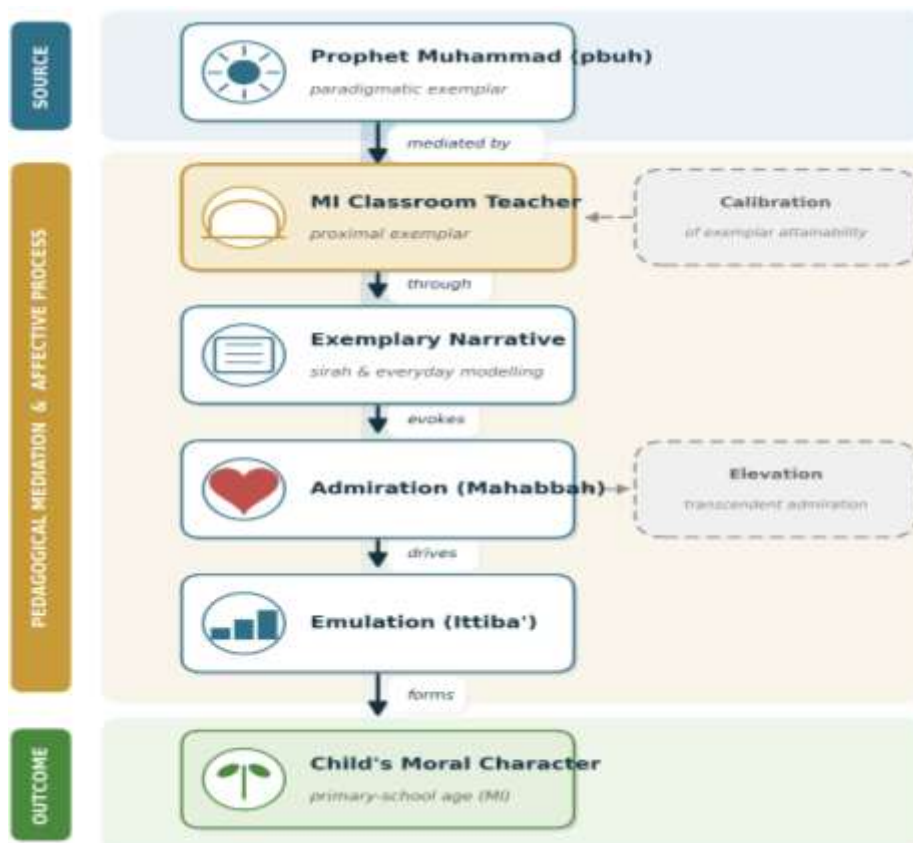


Figure 3. The affective mechanism of exemplary behavior in the reconstruction of uswah ḥasanah as a dimension of the professional character of elementary madrasah teachers

As shown in Figure 3, the “accessibility” dimension of calibration serves as a safety valve from the teacher’s perspective, and it is this dimension that requires special emphasis because it is here that the reconstruction addresses the critical aspects that have long been neglected. Findings indicate that role modeling does not always have a positive impact; role models placed too high and beyond the learners’ reach can trigger an inability to emulate, and even negative emotions (Carr, 2023; Croce, 2020). The implications for the context of elementary madrasahs are fundamental: presenting the Prophet solely as a perfectly flawless figure, without the mediation of a relatable and emulatable role model, risks leading children to admire him without being motivated to emulate him. The reconstruction of uswah ḥasanah therefore requires teachers not only to possess good character but also to have the sensitivity to calibrate the accessibility of the role model linking ideal nobility with down-to-earth exemplary behavior within themselves (Han & Dawson, 2024). This is what distinguishes this reconstruction from a mere reaffirmation of exemplary behavior.

Thus, the third research question can be fully answered. The reconstructed uswah ḥasanah is a dimension of the professional character of elementary madrasah teachers consisting of five integrated components. The first three components concern the functioning of exemplary behavior: the teacher’s character as a concrete moral reference, the ability to inspire admiration that drives emulation, and the mediating function between paradigmatic and proximal role models. The next two components concern its management: the reflective structuring of narratives of exemplary behavior and the awareness of calibrating the attainability of role models for children. This construct is mechanistically grounded in moral exemplarism and developmentally calibrated to the characteristics of elementary-aged children, thereby positioning exemplary behavior as a competency that can be developed, rather than a trait that is merely assumed to exist. This formulation serves as the basis for discussing its implications for professional development and the training of prospective elementary madrasah teachers in the following subsection.

3.5 Implications for Professional Development and the Training of Prospective Elementary Madrasah Teachers

The most immediate consequence of viewing *uswah ḥasanah* as a dimension of professional character is that exemplary behavior should no longer be treated as a quality that is assumed to be present on its own, but must instead be the subject of explicit development. If the effectiveness of exemplary behavior depends on specific, designable conditions (Han & Graham, 2024), then the ability to serve as a calibrated, proximate role model is a competency that must be cultivated, not a talent left to chance. This perspective demands a shift in how we view teacher professionalism from an emphasis on content mastery toward the recognition that moral dimensions and exemplary behavior are at the core of a teacher's professional identity (Buxarrais, 2021) and calls for reflective capacity as a component of professionalism that must be intentionally developed (Cramer et al., 2023). Thus, this reconstruction has tangible practical implications both for the professional development of in-service teachers and for the training of prospective teachers.

In the context of continuous professional development, these findings suggest expanding the scope of training for elementary madrasah teachers. Professional development programs for madrasah teachers in Indonesia including those under the teacher professional education scheme have thus far been largely oriented toward pedagogical competencies, subject matter mastery, and compliance with administrative standards (Mulyana et al., 2023). The reconstruction of *uswah ḥasanah* indicates that the dimension of character and exemplary conduct must be given equal weight in this development agenda, given that a teacher's personality and personal exemplary conduct are reinforcing factors in character education that cannot be replaced by subject matter mastery (Lukman et al., 2021). Such training should not merely stop at urging teachers to have good moral character but must equip them with an understanding of how exemplary behavior works how admiration is inspired, how narratives are managed, and how the accessibility of role models is calibrated for children. The management of character development in the madrasah environment also requires a well-planned strategy, not merely moral exhortations (El Widdah, 2022).

The more fundamental implications, however, lie in the training of prospective teachers at teacher-training institutions, including the Elementary Madrasah Teacher Education program. A teacher's professional identity does not emerge instantly when someone begins teaching, but rather is formed through a lengthy process during the prospective teacher's education (Živković et al., 2023). Research shows that the exemplary behavior demonstrated by faculty members and mentor teachers has a tangible impact on the formation of prospective teachers' professional identity; prospective teachers imitate and internalize the ways in which their educators carry out their roles (Flores Delgado et al., 2020). This finding has important reflective implications: if *uswah ḥasanah* is a dimension of professional character shaped through exemplary behavior, then the educators of prospective teachers themselves serve as proximal role models for their students. In other words, the same mechanism analyzed at the teacher student level also operates at the lecturer prospective teacher level; thus, the development of prospective teachers' professional character requires a teacher education environment that consciously exemplifies the values it seeks to instill.

Developing this competency requires a reflective approach, not merely the transmission of knowledge about exemplary behavior. Prospective teachers need to be guided to recognize their role as proximal role models and to develop the sensitivity to gauge the appropriateness of their exemplary behavior. This capacity aligns with the requirement that teacher education foster metareflexivity the ability to critically weigh and reconcile various professional roles and demands (Cramer et al., 2023). Research developments on teacher identity over the past two decades also confirm that the formation of professional identity is a complex and dynamic process, one that requires adequate space for reflection within the teacher education curriculum (Zhang & Wang, 2022). Thus, this reconstruction directs the education of elementary madrasah teacher candidates to go beyond merely teaching the theory of exemplary behavior; rather, it aims to provide reflective experiences that enable teacher candidates to shape themselves as role models.

One critical implication must be emphasized so that this reconstruction is not misunderstood. The cultivation of exemplary behavior must not devolve into the presentation of unattainable moral ideals, because presenting role models that are too lofty risks paralyzing rather than motivating (Carr, 2023). Both in teacher training and in the education of prospective teachers, it is important to foster an awareness that effective role models are those that are attainable and relatable to learners' lives (Croce, 2020), and that the use of role

models in education requires careful design grounded in an understanding of the conditions for their success (Han & Graham, 2024). It is this awareness that distinguishes the cultivation of mature role modeling from a mere call for teachers to be perfect role models a call that, without proper calibration, can be counterproductive for elementary-aged children.

Based on the entire discussion above, the fourth research question can be answered. The reconstruction of *uswah hasanah* has implications for two complementary policy directions: at the professional level, it requires that exemplary character competencies be made an explicit component of the continuous professional development of elementary madrasah teachers; and at the level of teacher candidate training, it requires teacher education that positions self-development as a proximal role model complete with calibrated sensitivity and reflective capacity as a core component of the curriculum, rather than a supplement. As a conceptual study, this reconstruction has limitations that must be acknowledged: it offers a theoretical framework that still requires empirical testing. Further research could be directed toward developing and validating measurement instruments for these dimensions of professional character, as well as testing their application in the real-world context of learning in elementary madrasahs (Han & Graham, 2024; Zhang & Wang, 2022). Thus, the framework offered in this article simultaneously opens up a broader research agenda regarding exemplary behavior as a professional competency for teachers.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that *uswah hasanah* is best understood as a dimension of the professional character of elementary madrasah teachers, rather than merely a method applied to students. Through an examination of moral exemplarism and moral development theory, the concept of exemplary behavior which has long been strongly normative gains a mechanistic explanation and developmental calibration that had previously been absent. This reconstruction yields a construct with five integrated components: the teacher's character as a concrete moral reference; the ability to inspire admiration that drives emulation; the mediating function between paradigmatic and proximal role models; the reflective management of exemplary narratives; and the awareness of calibrating the attainability of role models for children. Thus, exemplary behavior shifts from a quality assumed to be present to a professional competency that can be defined and developed.

The novelty of this research lies in bridging two discourses that have thus far developed separately: the Islamic tradition of exemplary conduct and contemporary moral studies on exemplarism, thereby positioning elementary school teachers as proximal role models who mediate the prophetic ideal while also incorporating a critical awareness of the risks of role modeling that is beyond the reach of elementary-aged children a perspective not previously found in the literature on *uswah hasanah*. Further research is recommended to develop and empirically test measurement instruments for these dimensions of professional character within the real-world context of learning in elementary madrasahs.

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