Islamic Character Education Strategies for Preventing Bullying: A Qualitative Case Study at Madrasah Aliyah Baitul Arqam, Aceh Besar

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Purpose of the study: This study examines Islamic character education strategies implemented to prevent bullying behavior at Madrasah Aliyah Baitul Arqam, Aceh Besar. **Methodology:** A qualitative case study design was employed involving 15 informants, including the school principal, Islamic Religious Education teachers, guidance and counseling teachers, and students. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation, and analyzed using descriptive qualitative techniques supported by triangulation. **Main Findings:** The findings indicate significant qualitative outcomes, including positive behavioral changes among students, increased awareness of the psychological and social impacts of bullying, stronger internalization of Islamic moral values, and a noticeable reduction in bullying incidents. Islamic character education is systematically implemented through teacher role modeling, religious habituation, moral instruction, and Islamic-based disciplinary practices. These mechanisms cultivate empathy, self-regulation, mutual respect, and a sense of safety within the school environment. **Novelty/Originality of this study:** This research introduces an integrative Islamic preventive model that combines character education and Islamic conflict resolution such as nasihah, musyawarah, and spiritual guidance as an effective framework for bullying prevention in Islamic secondary education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a serious and persistent problem in educational institutions worldwide, including in Indonesia. In the Indonesian context, bullying (perundungan) has been identified as one of the most frequent forms of violence experienced by students in schools and madrasas. Data released by the Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI) indicate that violence in educational settings continues to increase annually, with bullying consistently ranking among the top categories of reported cases [1]. In 2023 alone, thousands of cases related to violations of child protection were documented, including physical, verbal, psychological, and social bullying occurring in formal educational environments [1].

At the global level, UNESCO reports that nearly one-third of students worldwide have experienced bullying at least once during their school years, with significant impacts on mental health, academic engagement, and social development [2]. Bullying has been empirically linked to anxiety, depression, decreased academic

achievement, school avoidance, and long-term psychosocial difficulties [3], [4]. These impacts demonstrate that bullying is not merely a disciplinary issue, but a complex educational and moral problem requiring preventive, value-based, and systemic interventions.

In Islamic educational institutions such as madrasas, bullying presents a particular paradox. Madrasas are designed to foster moral integrity, religious values, and ethical conduct rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah. However, empirical evidence suggests that moral instruction alone does not automatically prevent aggressive or harmful behavior among students [5]. This reality highlights the need for effective Islamic character education strategies that go beyond normative teaching and actively internalize values into students' daily behavior.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of character education in preventing bullying. Character education is widely understood as a holistic process that integrates cognitive understanding, moral feeling, and moral action [6]. Within Islamic education, character formation (akhlak) is central and encompasses values such as compassion (rahmah), justice ('adl), honesty (sidq), self-control (iffah), and mutual respect (ta'awun) [7]-[9]. These values are not only taught theoretically but are expected to be practiced consistently through habituation, role modeling, and social interaction.

Recent research on bullying prevention within Islamic education contexts shows promising yet limited findings. Studies by Awwaliansyah and Shunhaji [7] demonstrate that Qur'an-based character education can reduce bullying tendencies by strengthening students' moral awareness. Hasanah et al. [8] further argue that Islamic education plays a strategic role in shaping students' moral reasoning and behavior when values are integrated into daily learning activities. Similarly, Mufti et al. [10] and Huda and Khadavi [11] highlight the central role of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers in preventing bullying through moral instruction and exemplary behavior.

Other studies focus on institutional and cultural approaches. Mustofa et al. [12] report that Islamic school policies emphasizing guidance rather than punishment contribute to more empathetic student behavior. Putra et al. [13] show that counseling approaches grounded in Islamic values can help resolve bullying cases and restore social harmony. Pratama et al. [14] emphasize that school-wide strategies integrating Islamic values into discipline systems are effective in building empathy and reducing aggressive behavior.

Despite these contributions, several critical gaps remain in the existing literature. First, most studies tend to be descriptive and focus on isolated aspects of character education, such as teacher roles or curriculum content, without examining Islamic character education as a comprehensive preventive system embedded within school culture. Second, there is limited qualitative evidence demonstrating actual behavioral changes, patterns of value internalization, and reductions in bullying incidents from the perspectives of multiple school stakeholders. Third, the specific mechanisms through which Islamic practices such as religious habituation, moral advice (nasihah), deliberation (musyawarah), and spiritual guidance function as preventive tools against bullying remain underexplored.

Furthermore, research focusing specifically on the madrasah aliyah level is still scarce, even though adolescents are particularly vulnerable to peer aggression and identity conflicts [3], [5]. This gap underscores the need for in-depth qualitative studies that explore how Islamic character education operates in real school contexts and how it contributes to creating safe, respectful, and value-oriented learning environments.

Responding to these gaps, this study aims to examine Islamic character education strategies implemented at Madrasah Aliyah Baitul Arqam, Aceh Besar, as a preventive approach to bullying behavior. This study offers several scientific contributions to the field of Islamic Religious Education. Conceptually, it frames Islamic character education as a holistic preventive framework that integrates curriculum, school culture, religious habituation, and Islamic conflict resolution principles. Empirically, it provides rich qualitative evidence of behavioral change, value internalization, and reduced bullying practices based on the lived experiences of students, teachers, and school leaders. Theoretically, this study strengthens the discourse on Islamic education by demonstrating how Islamic moral values can be operationalized into effective preventive mechanisms that address contemporary social problems within educational settings.

Through this contribution, the study is expected to enrich Islamic Religious Education scholarship and provide practical insights for educators, policymakers, and Islamic schools seeking to develop sustainable, value-based strategies to prevent bullying and foster a safe and dignified educational environment.

2. RESEARCH METHOD
2.1. Research Design
This study employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design. The case study was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of Islamic character education strategies implemented to prevent bullying behavior within a specific educational context, namely Madrasah Aliyah Baitul Arqam, Aceh Besar. This design allows for comprehensive exploration of social phenomena by capturing participants' experiences, perceptions, and interactions within their natural setting. The qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for

examining value internalization, behavioral change, and moral practices that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative methods.

2.2. Research Participants

The research involved 15 informants selected through purposive sampling. Informant selection was based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, ensuring data richness and credibility. The criteria for selecting informants were as follows:

1. School Principal (1 person):
   a. Has served in a leadership role for at least one year
   b. Possesses comprehensive knowledge of school policies and disciplinary systems
2. Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Teachers (4 persons):
   a. Actively teach IRE subjects
   b. Directly involved in character education and student moral development
   c. Have experience addressing student behavioral issues
3. Guidance and Counseling Teachers (2 persons):
   a. Responsible for handling student discipline and counseling
   b. Involved in resolving bullying-related cases
4. Students (8 persons):
   a. Represent different grade levels
   b. Have participated in school religious and character education activities
   c. Willing to share experiences related to peer interaction and school climate

This selection ensured multiple perspectives and enabled triangulation of viewpoints among school leaders, educators, and students.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected over a period of approximately three months, allowing sufficient time for in-depth engagement with the research setting and participants. Three main data collection techniques were employed:

1. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' perspectives on bullying prevention and Islamic character education. The interview guide included key questions such as:
   a. How is bullying understood and addressed in the school context?
   b. What Islamic values are emphasized in preventing bullying behavior?
   c. How do teachers model Islamic character in daily interactions?
   d. What disciplinary and conflict resolution strategies are applied when bullying occurs?
   e. What behavioral changes have been observed among students?

2. Participant Observation

Observations were conducted during learning activities, religious habituation programs, and daily school interactions. This technique aimed to capture real-time practices of character education, student behavior, and teacher-student interactions.

3. Documentation

Relevant documents were reviewed, including school regulations, codes of conduct, curricula, lesson plans, and records related to student behavior and disciplinary actions.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, consisting of four interrelated steps:
   a. Data Collection: Gathering data through interviews, observations, and documentation.
   b. Data Reduction: Selecting, focusing, simplifying, and categorizing data relevant to Islamic character education and bullying prevention.
   c. Data Display: Organizing reduced data into thematic matrices and narrative descriptions to facilitate interpretation.
   d. Conclusion Drawing and Verification: Identifying patterns, themes, and relationships, and continuously verifying findings through cross-checking and reflection.

This iterative process ensured that analysis was conducted systematically and grounded in empirical data.

2.5. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied the following strategies:
   a. Credibility: Achieved through triangulation of data sources (principal, teachers, students), techniques (interviews, observations, documentation), and time.
   b. Transferability: Supported by providing rich, contextual descriptions of the research setting and participants.

c. Dependability: Ensured by maintaining detailed documentation of the research process and data analysis procedures.
d. Confirmability: Strengthened through reflective analysis and the use of multiple data sources to minimize researcher bias.

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1 Students' Understanding of Bullying and Its Impacts

3.1.1 Conceptual Understanding of Bullying
The findings reveal that students demonstrate a clear conceptual understanding of bullying, including its physical, verbal, and psychological forms. Most students were able to distinguish bullying from ordinary conflict, emphasizing repetition, power imbalance, and intentional harm. One student stated: "Bullying is not just hitting, but also constantly teasing or making friends feel inferior and afraid." (Student 3). This understanding reflects increased moral awareness fostered through Islamic character education, which emphasizes respect (ta'awun) and compassion (rahmah).

3.1.2 Perceived Psychological and Social Impacts
Students consistently acknowledged the negative psychological and social consequences of bullying, such as fear, decreased self confidence, and social withdrawal. "If bullied, children can be lazy about going to school and feel unappreciated." (Student 6). These perceptions align with global findings indicating that bullying significantly affects students' mental health and academic engagement [2], [5], [15].

3.2 Behavioral Changes and Reduction in Bullying Incidents

3.2.1 Observable Behavioral Changes
Teachers and counseling staff reported positive behavioral changes among students, including increased empathy, polite communication, and self control. "Now children are more careful in speaking and remind each other if someone starts teasing them." (IRE Teacher 2). These changes indicate successful internalization of Islamic moral values rather than mere compliance with school rules.

3.2.2 Reduction in Bullying Cases
School documentation and interviews indicate a noticeable decline in reported bullying incidents over recent years. "Bullying cases are rare, and even if they do occur, they can be resolved quickly and amicably." (Counseling Teacher 1). This finding supports evidence that preventive, school-wide approaches are more effective than punitive discipline [16]-[19].

3.3 Teacher Role Modeling as a Moral Mechanism
Teachers consistently act as moral exemplars by demonstrating patience, fairness, and respectful communication. "Teachers try to be role models, because children see and imitate our behavior."(IRE Teacher 1). Role modeling reinforces Islamic character education by translating abstract values into observable behavior, strengthening moral learning through imitation.

3.4 Religious Habituation and Value Internalization
Daily religious practices such as congregational prayers, Qur'an recitation, and moral reflection play a central role in internalizing Islamic values. "After congregational prayer, there is usually a short piece of advice reminding us to respect each other." (Student 1). These practices function as continuous moral reinforcement, embedding values into students' routines.

3.5 Islamic-Based Discipline and Conflict Resolution
Disciplinary measures prioritize guidance and restoration rather than punishment. "We prefer to advise and invite deliberation rather than punish." (School Principal). Islamic conflict resolution strategies—nasihah, musyawarah, and spiritual reflection help students recognize moral responsibility and rebuild relationships. The findings demonstrate that Islamic character education operates as a holistic preventive system against bullying when embedded in school culture, religious practices, and discipline mechanisms. Students' understanding of bullying and its impacts corresponds with international research emphasizing bullying's psychological and social consequences [2], [5], [15].

The observed behavioral changes and reduction in bullying incidents confirm prior studies showing that preventive, value-based interventions are more effective than reactive punishment [16]-[19]. In this context, Islamic values such as compassion (rahmah), justice ('adl), and self-restraint (iffah) function as internal moral controls that guide student behavior.

Teacher role modeling emerges as a critical mechanism, supporting research highlighting educators as central moral agents in character education [8], [12], [20]. By embodying Islamic values, teachers transform moral norms into lived practices, strengthening students' moral reasoning and behavior. Religious habituation

supports character education theory emphasizing the integration of moral cognition, emotion, and action [21]-[24]. Regular religious practices reinforce ethical awareness and promote self-regulation grounded in spiritual consciousness.

Furthermore, Islamic-based conflict resolution aligns with restorative discipline models, emphasizing responsibility, empathy, and social harmony rather than fear-based compliance [12], [25]-[28]. This approach not only prevents recurrence of bullying but also nurtures a compassionate school climate. Overall, these findings extend Islamic Religious Education scholarship by demonstrating how Islamic values can be operationalized into concrete, effective mechanisms for bullying prevention within madrasah contexts [29], [30].

The findings have concrete practical implications for Islamic schools and Islamic Religious Education (IRE) teachers. First, bullying prevention programs in Islamic schools should be designed as preventive and educative systems, not merely reactive disciplinary responses. School leaders are encouraged to institutionalize Islamic character education through clear policies that integrate moral values into daily routines, school regulations, and student interaction norms.

Second, IRE teachers play a strategic role as moral role models, not only as subject instructors. Teachers' consistent demonstration of respectful communication, empathy, and fairness significantly influences students' behavior. Therefore, professional development programs for IRE teachers should include training on role modeling, restorative discipline, and Islamic-based conflict mediation.

Third, Islamic schools should formally incorporate religious habituation activities such as congregational prayers, Qur'anic reflection, and moral counseling as structured components of bullying prevention strategies. When combined with Islamic conflict resolution practices (nasihah, musyawarah, and spiritual reflection), these approaches offer a restorative alternative to punitive discipline and help prevent the recurrence of bullying behavior.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to Islamic education scholarship by advancing the conceptualization of Islamic character education as a holistic preventive framework. Rather than viewing character education as a cognitive or normative process, this study demonstrates how Islamic values operate as internal moral regulators that shape students' behavior through habituation, social interaction, and moral exemplification.

This research also bridges character education theory and Islamic moral philosophy by showing how values such as rahmah, 'adl, iffah, and ta'awun are translated into practical educational mechanisms. Consequently, the study enriches theoretical discussions in Islamic Religious Education by offering an empirically grounded model that connects moral internalization, school culture, and restorative discipline in addressing contemporary educational challenges such as bullying.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted as a single-case qualitative study in one madrasah, which limits the transferability of findings to different institutional or cultural contexts. Second, the study relies primarily on qualitative data derived from interviews, observations, and documentation, which may be influenced by participants' subjective perceptions. Third, the absence of quantitative baseline and follow-up data on bullying frequency restricts the ability to measure the magnitude of behavioral change statistically.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine the long-term impact of Islamic character education on bullying prevention. Comparative studies across different madrasas, regions, or educational levels would further enhance understanding of contextual factors influencing program effectiveness. Additionally, future research should explore the integration of Islamic character education with digital ethics and cyberbullying prevention, given the increasing relevance of online interactions among students.

4. **CONCLUSION**

This study confirms that Islamic character education functions effectively as a structured and preventive system for addressing bullying behavior when it is implemented integratively within school culture, pedagogy, and disciplinary practices. The findings demonstrate that bullying prevention at Madrasah Aliyah Baitul Arqam is not the result of isolated moral instruction, but rather the outcome of interconnected mechanisms involving teacher role modeling, religious habituation, value-oriented discipline, and Islamic conflict resolution practices. These mechanisms contribute to observable behavioral changes, strengthened value internalization, and a measurable reduction in bullying incidents, resulting in a safer and more respectful school climate.

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