

Integrating Spiritual Reflection and Social Ethics: Islamic Character Education for Indonesian Migrant Children in a Non-Formal Setting

Sarah Lady Diana Islamy

Universitas Islam Syarifuddin Lumajang, Indonesia

sarahlady202@gmail.com

Ahmad Hafidz Lubis

Universitas Islam Syarifuddin Lumajang, Indonesia

ahmadhafidzlubis@gmail.com

Haidar Idris

Universitas Islam Syarifuddin Lumajang, Indonesia

haidaridris8@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Sarah Lady Diana Islamy

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Abstract

The moral and religious formation of Indonesian migrant children abroad is constrained by restricted access to formal schooling and by assimilative pressures in the host country. This article examines how Islamic character education at a Community Learning Center and Non-Formal Education Program (PKBM PNF) under the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Kuala Lumpur integrates spiritual self-reflection and social ethics to shape learners' character. Existing research focuses on formal schools and pesantren in Indonesia; this study addresses a non-formal institution serving a labor-migrant diaspora. A qualitative transcendental-phenomenological design was used. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis with 12 purposively selected participants: 8 migrant-child learners, 2 teachers, 1 program manager, and 1 staff member. Analysis proceeded through data reduction, thematization, and source–method triangulation. Three themes emerged. Daily worship habituation and Qur'anic learning cultivated religious awareness and spiritual self-reflection; teacher exemplification and adab mentoring cultivated social ethics expressed as respect, discipline, and responsibility; and the two processes did not operate in isolation but reinforced one another, a link learners stated themselves, producing a character that was spiritually grounded, emotionally regulated, and socially aware. The study argues that PKBM PNF functions not merely as a service provider but as a strategic site of character formation and religious-identity reinforcement for undocumented migrant children. It contributes evidence that effective Islamic character education depends less on institutional status or resources than on consistent habituation, teacher modeling, and the deliberate fusion of spiritual and social learning.

Keywords: Islamic character education; spiritual self-reflection; social ethics; Indonesian migrant children; non-formal education.

Introduction

Labor migration from Indonesia to Malaysia has created a persistent educational problem for the children who migrate with, or are born to, migrant workers. Learning centers in Sabah and Sarawak serve tens of thousands of these children, while a smaller network of guidance centers reaches a few thousand in Peninsular Malaysia.¹ These arrangements have widened access for non-citizen children. Still, provision remains geographically uneven, with most children clustered in East Malaysia, where migrant communities have settled, and informal learning centers have become the main route to schooling.² For stateless and undocumented children in particular, these centers are often the only door left open, even as public reporting frames such children as having restricted access to education and no durable legal remedy.³

Access is not the only barrier. Migrant children still face obstacles to educational continuity: restrictions tied to legal status, language difficulties, and weak infrastructure.⁴ Undocumented status excludes many Indonesian children from mainstream Malaysian schools and from Indonesian-medium schools alike, so that non-formal provision is the principal remaining route.⁵ Malaysia's legal framework does not yet fully guarantee these children's right to education,⁶ Unstable household income and scarce facilities compound the problem, with some learners reaching these centers without basic literacy.

A second concern has drawn less attention: how a diaspora generation forms its religious identity and moral character while growing up within an unfamiliar, pluralistic society. Malaysia's multicultural setting fosters cultural exchange but also exposes children to competing value frames, so that Islamic values are continually negotiated

¹ N Heryati, C Wijaya, and L M Jannah, "The Dynamic Governance for Basic Education Access of Indonesian Migrant Workers' Children in Malaysia," *Cakrawala Pendidikan* 45, no. 1 (2026): 43–56, <https://doi.org/10.21831/cp.v45i1.91176>.

² Tharani Loganathan et al., "Undocumented: An Examination of Legal Identity and Education Provision for Children in Malaysia," *PLoS ONE* 17, no. 2 (2022): e0263404, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0263404>.

³ Daron Benjamin Loo and Linda Lagason, "Framing the Stateless Children in Sabah: An Examination through Corpus Analysis," *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 18, no. 2 (2022): 201–26, <https://doi.org/10.21315/ijaps2022.18.2.9>.

⁴ Tharani Loganathan et al., "Barriers and Facilitators to Education Access for Marginalised Non-Citizen Children in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study," *PLoS ONE* 18, no. 6 (2023): e0286793, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0286793>.

⁵ Loganathan et al., "Undocumented: An Examination of Legal Identity and Education Provision for Children in Malaysia."

⁶ Aminuddin Mustaffa et al., "Rights of Undocumented Migrant Children to Education under the Malaysian Legal Framework: Towards a Human Right Approach," *IJUM Law Journal* 30, no. S1 (2022): 229–52, <https://doi.org/10.31436/iiumlj.v30iS1.705>.

against local influences. The same tension is documented among Muslim migrant parents elsewhere, who reconsider how religious identity is passed on once integration and everyday life pull in different directions.⁷ This poses the study's central problem: can Islamic character education, which these children need, be delivered effectively when a non-formal institution runs with few staff, limited resources, and no fully integrated curriculum? Field observation suggested that although such institutions give learners a sense of belonging and nurture Islamic values, character education still struggles to reach them in depth, partly because many arrive with a limited grasp of basic worship (fiqh), correct practice, and virtuous conduct (adab).

The study rests on one premise: Islamic character education depends on the union of spiritual self-reflection and social ethics. Islamically oriented personality psychology treats the person as an integrated whole, physical, psychological, and spiritual, in which self-knowledge gained through one's relationship with the Creator is a principal route to becoming a good person.⁸ Al-Attas's concept of *ta'dīb* places *adab* at the center of this formation: education is not merely the transmission of knowledge (ta'līm) but the shaping of moral conduct in everyday life.⁹ Studies of value-based character education in Indonesian boarding schools show that such formation can produce a Muslim identity that is both learned and socially ethical. That character can be cultivated across formal, non-formal, and informal settings rather than in formal schooling alone.¹⁰

This body of work concentrates on formal institutions and pesantren inside Indonesia, with established curricula and resources. Four gaps follow. First, the diaspora context is under-theorized. Research on migrant families shows that value transmission

⁷ Anna Miglietta, Dalia El Brashy, and Roberta Ricucci, "Religious Transmission and Cultural Negotiation in First-Generation Muslim Migrant Parents in Italy: A Qualitative Study," *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 34, no. 3 (2024): e2792, <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2792>.

⁸ S S B Surbakti, R Harahap, and U Hasanah, "Future Perspectives on the Islamic Personality Model: Integrating Spiritual, Moral, Intellectual, Social, Personal, and Behavioral Dimensions for Holistic Development," *Journal on Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2024): 17–35.

⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1999).

¹⁰ C Niswah et al., "Analisis Peran Lembaga Pendidikan Pesantren Dalam Membangun Karakter Dan Ilmu Pengetahuan," *Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin* 3, no. 6 (2025): 308–16; Armyn Hasibuan et al., "Sufistic Approach of Character Education in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 49, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v49i1.1332>; Glory Islamic et al., "Character Education through Philosophical Values in Traditional Islamic Boarding Schools," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 45, no. 1 (2024): 31–42, <https://doi.org/10.34044/j.kjss.2024.45.1.04>.

is strained by cultural difference and by limited access to regular institutions,¹¹ and recent work on Indonesian diaspora schooling frames education abroad as a site of continual identity negotiation between a national curriculum and learners' hybrid realities.¹² However, how a non-formal Islamic institution compensates for these strains remains unexamined.

Second, spiritual self-reflection and social ethics have mostly been studied apart from the first within Islamic psychology, the second within moral education (akhlāq), and the sociology of education, leaving their interaction in the lived experience of migrant-children learners unexplored. The integration of spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions in Muslim personality formation has been argued conceptually, but empirical evidence of its enactment in non-formal settings is scarce.¹³

Third, non-formal institutions such as PKBM have rarely been examined as sites of character development and Islamic-identity formation for migrant children, even though PKBM PNF is effectively the only provider for undocumented Indonesian children in Kuala Lumpur. Character education in non-formal settings has been reviewed for other vulnerable young populations, where it clusters in sports and community programs rather than religious ones,¹⁴ But phenomenological accounts of Islamic character formation among migrant children are almost absent. The nearest work lies elsewhere: Saefudin et al. study Indonesian migrant children in Sabah but focus on national identity within a dual-education arrangement,¹⁵ while Baequni et al. examine a school-based pesantren on the Sebatik–Nunukan border.¹⁶ Neither addresses Peninsular Malaysia, nor the integration of spiritual reflection with social ethics.

¹¹ Miglietta, El Brashy, and Ricucci, “Religious Transmission and Cultural Negotiation in First-Generation Muslim Migrant Parents in Italy: A Qualitative Study.”

¹² Argitha Aricindy et al., “Constructing Meaningful Education in the Diaspora: A Critical Reflection on the Indonesian Curriculum at the Indonesian School of The Hague,” *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2026.2678552>.

¹³ I Hilmi et al., “Strategi Dan Model Penanaman Karakter Dalam Pendidikan Formal Dan Nonformal Berbasis Nilai-Nilai Islam,” *Journal of Communication Education* 20, no. 1 (2026): 87–94.

¹⁴ Idoia Correa Díaz, “Character Education with Vulnerable Children and Adolescents in Non-Formal Contexts: A Systematic Review,” *International Journal of Educational Research* 139 (2026): 103052, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2026.103052>.

¹⁵ Arif Saefudin, Jumintono, and Rejokirono, “National Identity in Transnational Life: The Case of Dual Education of Indonesian Migrant Children in Sabah, East Malaysia,” *Kajian Malaysia* 42, no. 1 (2024): 117–38, <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2024.42.1.6>.

¹⁶ Baequni, Suryadi, and Zaenab Hanim, “The School-Based Pesantren in Border State, an Alternative to Character Education for Children of Indonesian Migrant Workers?,” *International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering* 8, no. 6 (2019): 26–29, <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.21-11-2018.2282026>.

Fourth, diaspora research on Islamic education has concentrated on Western host societies, the Netherlands, the United States, Canada, and Italy. In contrast, Malaysia, the principal destination for Indonesian migrant workers and a setting with markedly different socio-cultural and immigration conditions, remains comparatively little studied. Comparable diaspora work on non-formal Islamic moral formation exists for other communities, Turkish mosque education in the Netherlands, transnational Senegalese Qur'anic education, and Islamic schooling among Muslim minorities in the West. Still, it has not been extended to Indonesian labour-migrant children.¹⁷

This study examines how integrating spiritual self-reflection and social ethics shapes Islamic character among Indonesian migrant children at PKBM PNF in Kuala Lumpur. Three questions guide it: RQ1. How do learners internalize spiritual self-reflection, and how does this shape their Islamic character? RQ2. How do learners form social ethics, and what challenges arise in that process? RQ3. What role does the integration of spiritual self-reflection and social ethics play in shaping their Islamic character?

Research Method

The study uses a qualitative transcendental-phenomenological design.¹⁸ within an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm. Phenomenology seeks to disclose the shared, lived experience of a phenomenon and what it means to those who undergo it;¹⁹ Here, the phenomenon is the internalization of Islamic character through spiritual self-reflection and social ethics. The design fits the three research questions because spiritual experience and social ethics are contextual and meaning-laden, reachable through participants' own descriptions rather than through measurement. The same design has been applied to the education of Indonesian migrant children in Sabah, supporting its suitability for this population.

¹⁷ Semiha Sözeri, H K Altinyelken, and M L L Volman, “Pedagogies of Turkish Mosque Education in the Netherlands: An Ethno-Case Study of Mosque Classes at Milli Görüş and Diyanet,” *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 9, no. 11 (2021): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-BJA10024>; Hannah Hoechner, “Senegalese Migrants’ Children, Homeland Returns, and Islamic Education in a Transnational Setting,” *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 18, no. 3 (2020): 264–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2020.1722071>; Jasmin Zine, *Canadian Islamic Schools: Unravelling the Politics of Faith, Gender, Knowledge, and Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Clark E Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods.*, *Phenomenological Research Methods*. (Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc, 1994).

¹⁹ S Hamdani, “Implementasi Metode Fenomenologi Dalam Penelitian Pendidikan Islam,” *Ta’dib: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Dan Isu-Isu Sosial* 22, no. 1 (2024): 35–53.

Fieldwork was conducted at PKBM PNF Kuala Lumpur, a non-formal program under the auspices of the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia. The site was selected for three reasons. First, it is the principal non-formal provider under the Embassy for undocumented Indonesian children in Peninsular Malaysia who, lacking documentation, cannot access Indonesian- or Malaysian-medium schools.²⁰ Second, it embeds Islamic character education through the habituation to daily worship, Qur'anic study, and disciplined *adab*. Third, it sits within a diaspora context whose socio-cultural and educational conditions differ from those of other diaspora settings.

Participants were selected purposively. Inclusion criteria for learners were: active enrolment at PKBM PNF for at least one year; age 7–15; having a parent employed abroad as an Indonesian migrant worker; voluntary participation with parental or guardian consent; and fluency in Indonesian. The one-year minimum ensured sufficient exposure to the program.

Twelve participants took part: eight migrant-children learners, two teachers, one program manager (*pengelola*), and one administrative staff member. This number reflects the depth-over-breadth logic of phenomenological inquiry, in which small samples can capture rich, structurally described experience,²¹ and data collection stops once no new themes emerge.²² The four adult informants, two teachers, the manager, and the staff member, also served triangulation, corroborating and contextualizing learners' accounts.

To protect participant identity, a particular concern given the learners' status as children of undocumented migrant workers, every participant is referred to by an anonymized code rather than by name: L1–L8 for the eight learners, T1–T2 for the two teachers, A1 for the program manager, and A2 for the administrative staff member.

The researcher was the primary instrument, acting as collector, analyst, and reporter.²³ Supplementary tools included: a semi-structured interview guide derived from the conceptual framework of Islamic character education; participant observation sheets; documentation (photographs, video, field notes); and participant reflective journals. To

²⁰ Loganathan et al., “Undocumented: An Examination of Legal Identity and Education Provision for Children in Malaysia.”

²¹ Joan E Dodgson, “About Research: Qualitative Methodologies,” *Journal of Human Lactation* 33, no. 2 (2017): 355–58.

²² Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, “How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability,” *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (2006): 59–82.

²³ Yvonna S Lincoln and Egon G Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (sage, 1985).

strengthen instrument validity, two Islamic-education specialists and one qualitative-research specialist reviewed the alignment between the interview guide and the study's objectives, informing revisions before fieldwork.

Three complementary methods were used. In-depth interviews (60–90 minutes) were conducted in Indonesian at participant-chosen locations. Participant observation covered teaching–learning sessions, daily worship, and social activities. Document analysis drew on curriculum documents, activity records, and learners' work. Collection and analysis proceeded concurrently.

Interview responses were first recorded as researcher notes and then reconstructed into direct, first-person narrative form to aid readability; this reconstruction is not a verbatim transcript of the recording. To safeguard accuracy, each reconstructed narrative was returned to the corresponding participant for member checking, and only passages that the participant confirmed as an accurate account of their intended meaning were retained for citation in the Findings.

Analysis followed Moustakas's transcendental-phenomenological stages: bracketing of the researcher's assumptions, supported by a reflective log and supervision; horizontalisation, treating each statement as equally significant and coding it, discarding only non-pertinent or purely repetitive utterances; thematic clustering of coded meanings, worked inductively across repeated readings; textual description of what participants experienced, incorporating member-checked participant narratives; structural description of how and under what conditions the experience occurred; and synthesis of textual and structural descriptions into the essence of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness followed the four criteria of Lincoln and Guba.²⁴ Credibility rested on prolonged engagement, source and method triangulation, member-checking of both the findings and the reconstructed interview narratives, and peer debriefing. Transferability rested on a thick description of context, participants, and setting. Dependability rested on a transparent audit trail from problem identification to conclusion. Confirmability rested on supervisor and peer scrutiny of the data–interpretation link, to limit researcher bias.

²⁴ Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*.

Results

Analysis of interviews, observation, and documents across the twelve participants eight learners, two teachers, one programme manager, and one administrative staff member yielded three themes that address the research questions: (1) spiritual self-reflection through worship habituation and Qur'anic learning; (2) social ethics through teacher exemplification and *adab* mentoring; and (3) the integration of the two in a character that is spiritually grounded, emotionally regulated, and socially aware. The themes were derived through source and method triangulation, and the convergence of the eight learners' accounts (below) indicates that thematic saturation was reached.

Theme 1 Spiritual Self-Reflection through Worship Habituation and Qur'anic Learning (RQ1)

Regular practices, congregational Ḍuḥā and Zuhur prayers, Qur'anic *tadarus*, brief religious talks (*pengajian*), and self-reflection (*muḥāsabah*) were embedded in the school day to build religious awareness and closeness to Allah. Learners reported that this habituation prompted them to be mindful of Allah before acting, to evaluate themselves, and to correct their conduct in line with Islamic values; the effect manifested as disciplined worship, self-control, and a sense of responsibility.

L1: "Saya telah menjadi lebih biasa untuk berzikir kepada Allah sebelum melakukan apa-apa. Saya juga mula menyedari bahawa ibadat bukanlah sesuatu yang hanya dilakukan apabila disuruh, tetapi sesuatu yang benar-benar perlu dijadikan kebiasaan dalam kehidupan seharian." (*"I've become more used to remembering Allah before doing anything. I've also started to understand that worship isn't only done when told to do it; it needs to become a habit in everyday life."*)

Muḥāsabah, in particular, moved learners from recalling their actions to planning improvement.

L3: "Ya, kami mengambil bahagian dalam muhasabah. Biasanya, kami diminta merenungkan apa yang telah kami lakukan, termasuk sebarang kesilapan yang telah kami lakukan. Selepas itu, kami memikirkan apa yang perlu diperbaiki pada masa akan datang." (*"Yes, we take part in muhasabah. We're usually asked to recall what we've done, including any mistakes. Then we think about what needs improving going forward."*)

Learners linked this reflection to changes in conduct. L3 added that muḥāsabah made him "lebih berhati-hati kalau berbicara dan bertindak" and more respectful toward teachers and friends³ an early sign that spiritual reflection was already feeding into social conduct (Theme 3).

Teachers and the manager framed every activity as an act of worship so that religious values might take root.

T1: "Pendidikan karakter Islam di sini tidak hanya disampaikan melalui kurikulum, tetapi juga kami integrasikan ke dalam aktiviti harian kami. Ini termasuk solat Duha berjemaah, solat Zuhur berjemaah, tilawah al-Qur'an, sesi pengajian agama, dan muhasabah diri. Kami berusaha menjadikan ini satu kebiasaan bagi para pelajar kami. " (Islamic character education here isn't delivered through lesson content alone; *we integrate it into daily activities. There are congregational Duha and Zuhr prayers, Qur'an recitation, religious talks, and muhasabah. We try to make it a habit for the learners.*)

The manager explained why routine mattered.

A1: "Diharapkan dengan menjadikan amalan-amalan ini sebahagian rutin mereka secara berkala, aktiviti keagamaan akan menjadi sebahagian penting dalam kehidupan kanak-kanak. Dengan cara ini, kanak-kanak bukan sahaja akan biasa dengan ajaran agama, tetapi juga akan terbiasa mengamalkannya dalam kehidupan seharian mereka." (*"Because routine habituation is meant to make religious activity part of the child's life. So the child does not only know the teachings of the religion but also becomes used to applying them day to day."*)

Observation corroborated these accounts: most learners consistently participated in congregational prayer and tadarus and used muḥāsabah to set behavioral improvement targets. Worship habituation thus operated as an effective medium for cultivating spiritual self-reflection.

Theme 2 Social Ethics through Teacher Exemplification and Adab Mentoring (RQ2)

Social ethics are formed through modeling, habituation, and the application of Islamic values in daily interaction. Teachers not only taught *adab*; they embodied it, allowing learners to acquire it through observation.

L4: "Guru tidak hanya menjelaskan tentang adab, tetapi juga memberi contoh dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Kami diajarkan berbicara sopan, menghormati orang yang lebih tua, menyayangi teman yang lebih muda, dan tidak menyakiti orang lain." (*"Teachers don't just explain adab, they also set an example in everyday life. We're taught to speak politely, respect our elders, be affectionate toward younger friends, and not hurt others."*)

Teachers described this modeling as deliberate.

T1: "Kami berusaha menjadi teladan kepada murid-murid kami. Dalam kehidupan seharian, kami berusaha menunjukkan kesabaran, kejujuran, kesopanan dan pertimbangan. Harapan kami ialah agar kanak-kanak dapat menyaksikan tingkah laku ini secara langsung dan kemudian mencontohinya." (*"We try to be role models for the learners. In daily life, we try to show patience, honesty, courtesy, and care. The hope is that the children see it directly and then imitate that behavior."*)

When learners erred, teachers favored advice and explanation over punishment, so that learners understood the value behind the rule.

L2: "Jika saya melakukan kesilapan, guru saya biasanya memberi nasihat dan membantu saya menyedari apa yang salah. Saya digalakkan untuk memohon maaf

dan berusaha memastikan saya tidak mengulangi kesalahan tersebut." (*"When I make a mistake, the teacher usually advises me and helps me recognize what went wrong. I'm guided to apologize and to try not to repeat the mistake."*)

T1: "Jika murid melakukan kesalahan, kita cenderung memberi tumpuan lebih kepada memberi panduan dan menjelaskan nilai-nilai Islam yang menjadi asas kepada tingkah laku tertentu. Dengan cara ini, kanak-kanak tidak hanya takut akan hukuman, tetapi juga memahami mengapa penting untuk berkelakuan baik." (*"When a learner makes a mistake, we mostly use advice and explanation of the Islamic value behind the behavior. So the child isn't just afraid of punishment; they understand why good conduct matters."*)

The second teacher listed the everyday social routines through which this worked.

T2: "Kami mengajar kanak-kanak untuk beratur, berkongsi, membantu rakan-rakan mereka, bekerjasama, memohon maaf, menghormati guru dan orang tua, serta berhati-hati dengan kata-kata mereka apabila berinteraksi dengan orang lain." (*"We accustom the children to queuing, sharing, helping friends, cooperating, apologizing, respecting teachers and elders, and being careful with their words when interacting with others."*)

Learners' accounts converged on the same pattern, respect for teachers expressed as polite speech, attentive listening, and rule-following, and conflict resolved through dialogue and apology rather than punishment.

L6: "Saya diajar bercakap dengan sopan kepada guru-guru saya, mendengar apabila mereka bercakap, dan mematuhi peraturan di PKBM. ... Jika ada masalah dengan rakan, kami biasanya diminta berbincang bersama dan saling memohon maaf. Guru-guru cenderung memberi nasihat dan menjelaskan perkara-perkara tersebut daripada terus-menerus mengenakan hukuman." (*"I was taught to speak politely to teachers, to listen when a teacher is speaking, and to follow the rules at PKBM. ... When there's a problem with a friend, we're usually brought together to talk and to apologize. Teachers more often give advice and explanation than immediate punishment."*)

L7 and L8 gave materially the same account, which, together with the shared testimony above, indicates a consistent, saturated pattern rather than an isolated view. The administrative staff member, observing across the group, reported a matching change in behavior.

A2: "Secara amnya, saya telah melihat perkembangan positif dalam tingkah laku sosial kanak-kanak. Mereka semakin biasa berkongsi, bekerjasama, membantu rakan-rakan, serta menghormati guru-guru mereka. Apabila timbul masalah, mereka lebih cenderung menyelesaikannya melalui komunikasi dan saling memaafkan." (*"Overall, I see positive development in the children's social behavior. They're increasingly used to sharing, cooperating, helping friends, and respecting teachers, and when a problem arises, they're guided to resolve it through communication and mutual forgiveness."*)

Observation showed that most learners were engaging in the following behaviors: sharing, cooperating, assisting peers, and resolving conflicts through dialogue, thereby fostering harmonious interaction within PKBM.

Theme 3 Integration of Spiritual Reflection and Social Ethics in a Multidimensional Character (RQ3)

Learners came to see worship not only as a relationship with Allah but as the ground of good relationships with others. One learner stated this link directly.

L5: "Pada pendapat saya, ibadat bukan hanya tentang hubungan kita dengan Tuhan. Ia juga harus tercermin dalam cara kita melayani orang lain. Setelah mempelajari agama, kami telah digalakkan untuk menjadi lebih sopan, penyayang, dan bertanggung jawab." (*"In my view, worship is not only our relationship with Allah. It also has to show in how we behave toward others. After studying religion, we're also guided to be more polite, caring, and responsible."*)

The same learner described acting on that conviction by encouraging peers toward a good horizontal expression of a vertically grounded value.

L5: "Ya, saya pernah. Kami sering saling mengingatkan untuk melakukan amalan baik, termasuk mengingatkan satu sama lain tentang amalan keagamaan dan mengekalkan tingkah laku yang baik semasa berada di PKBM." (*"Yes, I have. We often remind one another to do good things, including reminders about worship and about keeping our behavior in check while at PKBM."*)

Teachers made the link explicit in their pedagogy.

T2: "Pada pandangan saya, kedua-duanya tidak dapat dipisahkan. Kami menyusun semua pendidikan agama kami supaya kanak-kanak memahami cara menerapkan apa yang mereka pelajari dalam hubungan mereka dengan orang lain. Sebagai contoh, kami menghubungkan ibadat dengan tanggungjawab, belas kasihan, kesabaran, dan rasa hormat terhadap orang lain." (*"In my view, the two can't be separated. We direct every religious lesson so that the child understands its application in relationships with others. For example, we link worship to responsibility, care, patience, and respect for one another."*)

The manager located this integration in the institution's purpose, framing PKBM as more than a teaching venue.

A1: "Bagi kami, PKBM bukan sekadar tempat kanak-kanak menerima pendidikan. Ia juga merupakan persekitaran yang membantu mereka mengembangkan identiti Islam mereka dan mengamalkan tingkah laku selaras dengan nilai-nilai Islam." (*"For us, PKBM is not only a place where children receive an education. It is also an environment that helps them build an Islamic identity and get used to behaving in line with Islamic values."*)

Read together, the learner's own statement of the vertical–horizontal link (L5), the teachers' explicit framing (T2), and the manager's account of the institution's role (A1) indicate that the relationship with Allah and the relationship with others were taught and experienced, as mutually reinforcing rather than as separate curricular tracks. Observation

supported this: learners reminded one another toward good, treated sharing as an act of worship, and resolved conflict through mutual forgiveness.

Implementation challenges

Two constraints limited the reach of this formation. First, character was unevenly developed beyond PKBM because most parents were migrant laborers with long hours, who could provide little supervision at home.

A2: "Cabaran utamanya ialah penanaman nilai Islam tidak sentiasa konsisten apabila kanak-kanak berada di luar persekitaran PKBM. Jadual ibu bapa yang bekerja sebagai pekerja migran yang padat bermakna masa yang ada untuk menyokong anak-anak mereka semakin terhad. Akibatnya, pembinaan watak dalam persekitaran keluarga tidak selalu berjalan seefektif yang sepatutnya." (*"The challenge is that Islamic character isn't always applied consistently once the child is outside the PKBM environment. Parents' busy schedules as migrant workers limit the time to accompany their children, so reinforcing character at home hasn't always run optimally."*)

Second, the staff was too few to provide consistent individual mentoring, and teachers handled both general instruction and character education.

T2: "Salah satu cabaran ialah masa yang terhad dan kekurangan kakitangan pengajar. Guru perlu menguruskan pengajaran umum dan pendidikan karakter, yang bermakna sokongan individu belum dapat diberikan sepenuhnya." (*"One constraint is limited time and a shortage of teaching staff. Teachers have to handle general instruction alongside character education, so individual mentoring hasn't been possible to the fullest extent."*)

These constraints show that the formation observed here depends on sustained synergy between the institution and the family, and that its effect is strongest within the PKBM environment.

Discussion

The findings are discussed in relation to the three research questions, and then drawn together to form the study's theoretical contribution and practical implications.

Spiritual self-reflection as cultivated, not spontaneous (RQ1)

Daily worship habituation and Qur'anic learning shaped learners' spiritually oriented self-reflection. This reflection did not arise on its own; it was cultivated through consistent practice that led learners to remember Allah, evaluate themselves, and correct their conduct. On this evidence, a non-formal setting can be an effective channel for internalizing religious principles. The pattern confirms the premise of Islamic personality

psychology that the relationship with Allah is foundational to Muslim personality development, integrating the physical, mental, and spiritual.²⁵

The mechanism aligns with al-Ghazālī's *tazkiyat al-nafs* purification of the soul through sustained spiritual practice and self-examination, which contemporary studies of Sufistic and spiritually oriented Islamic education have operationalized as staged, curriculum-embedded practice rather than one-off instruction.²⁶ Regular worship, religious study, and *muḥāsabah* here served as a gradual form of purification, so that religious character depended less on the delivery of content than on repeated spiritual experience until it became habitual.

Habituation alone, however, does not guarantee depth. Research on value internalization in primary-aged Muslim learners finds that routine practice builds character but risks superficial compliance unless paired with reflection and mentoring.²⁷ The place of *muḥāsabah* in this program is what answers that risk: reflection converts routine into self-governed conduct, which is why L3 reported becoming "more careful in what I say and do." Spiritual formation here was therefore neither automatic nor purely behavioral; it was habituation disciplined by reflection.

The study departs from accounts that locate the decisive factor in the family. Where research on migrant families treats the household as the primary vehicle of religious-value transmission,²⁸ most parents here, migrant laborers with long hours could give limited time to their children, and PKBM PNF absorbed that function by providing a structured religious environment. A non-formal institution can thus act as a compensatory site where the family's educational role is constrained. The finding also extends pesantren-based accounts of religious character cultivation: pesantren enjoy relatively complete curricula and resources, whereas PKBM PNF is limited in staff and facilities, yet consistent

²⁵ Surbakti, Harahap, and Hasanah, "Future Perspectives on the Islamic Personality Model: Integrating Spiritual, Moral, Intellectual, Social, Personal, and Behavioral Dimensions for Holistic Development"; F Wasfiyah et al., "Integrasi Sholat Sebagai Terapi Emosional Dalam Pendidikan Dan Konseling Islam," *Moderasi: Journal of Islamic Studies* 5, no. 1 (2025): 13–40.

²⁶ Hasibuan et al., "Sufistic Approach of Character Education in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School"; Ahmad Rivauzi et al., "Integration of Sufi Epistemology and Adherence to the Sharia: A Model for Mainstreaming the Moderation of Islamization at Madrasah Tarbiyah Islamiyah, Indonesia," *Juris: Jurnal Ilmiah Syariah* 24, no. 2 (2025): 311–30, <https://doi.org/10.31958/juris.v24i2.15756>.

²⁷ Lalu Gede Muhammad Zainuddin Astani and Prosmala Hadisaputra, "The Strategies for Internalizing Prophetic Leadership Values in Primary School-Aged Children: Lessons from Lombok, Indonesia," *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social and Community Studies* 21, no. 2 (2026): 89–108, <https://doi.org/10.18848/2324-7576/CGP/A284>.

²⁸ Miglietta, El Brashy, and Ricucci, "Religious Transmission and Cultural Negotiation in First-Generation Muslim Migrant Parents in Italy: A Qualitative Study."

habituation still instills spiritual reflection. Effectiveness depended on the consistency of habituation, teacher modeling, and the religious culture of the setting, rather than on institutional prestige or resources.

Social ethics through ta'dīb and modeling (RQ2)

Learners' social ethics developed through teacher exemplification and *adab* mentoring embedded in ordinary activity. Exposition conveyed *adab* cognitively, but learners were more affected by teachers' embodied patience, honesty, courtesy, and care, which T1 described as a deliberate effort "to be role models ... so the children see it directly and then imitate that behavior." Islamic moral instruction, on this evidence, succeeds when virtue is made observable and imitable. This corroborates al-Attas's *ta'dīb*, in which Islamic education aims to form a civilized person and in which teaching is inseparable from moral development.²⁹ The convergence of three elements: habituation of conduct, transmission of Islamic values, and daily modeling, enacts ta'dīb, so that learners integrate *adab* into behavior rather than merely understanding it. Comparative and text-based studies of *adab* pedagogy reach the same conclusion: *adab* is absorbed as a lived pedagogy through the teacher's example and staged practice, not through doctrinal transmission alone,³⁰ And character education anchored in Islamic values works best when it is comprehensive and embedded across the institution's daily life.³¹

The role of exemplification is consistent with the wider account of teacher *keteladanan* in Islamic moral pedagogy, and with Bandura's social-learning account, in which behavior is acquired by observing and imitating socially close or authoritative models; within PKBM, teachers act not only as instructors but as moral referents, and studies of value internalization confirm that teacher support and modeling are decisive for authentic, durable formation.³²

²⁹ al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*.

³⁰ Huda et al., "Character and Adab Education in Indonesia, Turkey, and Japan: A Comparative Study"; Muhammad Abror Rosyidin, Jasminto, and Jumari, "The Absorption of Islamic Education Thought of KH. M. Hasyim Asy'ari through Teaching of Adab Al-'Alim Wa Al-Muta'allim among the Santri at Pesantren Tebuireng," *Millah: Journal of Religious Studies* 22, no. 2 (2023): 611–40, <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol22.iss2.art12>; M Maslani et al., "The Hermeneutic Interpretation of Ta'lim Muta'allim by Al-Zarnuji in Shaping the Morals of Santri at Pesantren," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 9, no. 1 (2026): 18–32, <https://doi.org/10.31538/nzh.v9i1.206>.

³¹ D Izfanna and N A Hisyam, "A Comprehensive Approach in Developing 'Akhlaq': A Case Study on the Implementation of Character Education at Pondok Pesantren Darunnajah," *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal* 6, no. 2 (2012): 77–86, <https://doi.org/10.1108/17504971211236254>.

³² Albert Bandura and Richard H Walters, *Social Learning Theory*, vol. 1 (Englewood cliffs Prentice Hall, 1977); Astani and Hadisaputra, "The Strategies for Internalizing Prophetic Leadership Values in Primary School-Aged Children: Lessons from Lombok, Indonesia."

The study further illuminates *adab* education in a plural, diaspora environment. Unlike the relatively homogeneous pesantren, PKBM PNF is situated in a multicultural society, exposing learners to other faiths and ethnic communities. This fosters social ethics that are at once Islamic and grounded in shared values of empathy, cooperation, mutual respect, tolerance, and forgiveness. *Adab* education here is therefore non-exclusive and socially sensitive: learners retain and develop Islamic character while adapting to local social values. This resonates with diaspora accounts of non-formal Islamic moral formation elsewhere and with evidence that religious identity among diaspora Muslim youth can become more open to others, and with work showing that tolerance is sustained through everyday, embedded social practice rather than formal instruction alone.³³ It extends these accounts to Indonesian labour-migrant children, a population they do not cover.

Integration as the core contribution (RQ3)

The principal finding is that PKBM PNF does not cultivate spiritual reflection and social ethics as separate tracks; it fuses them. This is not only the teachers' framing but also the learners' own understanding: one learner stated that "worship is not only our relationship with Allah, it also has to show in how we behave toward others" (L5) and described acting on that conviction by reminding peers of good. Spiritual insight from worship became the ground on which social conduct developed. At the same time, moral interaction deepened the practice of religious values, so that the vertical relationship (with Allah) and the horizontal relationship (with others) evolved together, reinforcing one another. This supports the Islamic-personality framework in which Muslim personality is the integration of spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions,³⁴ and moves beyond it by showing how that integration is enacted in non-formal practice.

The pattern converges with two independent lines of evidence. Studies of Islamic educational models that deliberately integrate a spiritual epistemology with practical,

³³ Sözeri, Altinyelken, and Volman, "Pedagogies of Turkish Mosque Education in the Netherlands: An Ethno-Case Study of Mosque Classes at Milli Görüş and Diyanet"; Hoechner, "Senegalese Migrants' Children, Homeland Returns, and Islamic Education in a Transnational Setting"; Souheil Essid, "The Youth of Muslim Diaspora and Identity Markers: The Crossroads of School, Religion, and Society," *Journal of Educational and Social Research* 10, no. 3 (2020): 41–51, <https://doi.org/10.36941/JESR-2020-0044>; Mohamad Anas et al., "Local Wisdom as Social Regulation: The Role of Anjangsana Tradition in Shaping Interfaith Tolerance in Rural Indonesia," *Cogent Social Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2026): 2623301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2026.2623301>.

³⁴ Surbakti, Harahap, and Hasanah, "Future Perspectives on the Islamic Personality Model: Integrating Spiritual, Moral, Intellectual, Social, Personal, and Behavioral Dimensions for Holistic Development."

rule-governed conduct show the same staged fusion of inner orientation and outward behaviour,³⁵ and quantitative work finds that internalised spiritual education (*tarbiyyah ruhiyyah*) predicts stronger moral self-regulation and less deviant behaviour,³⁶ a mechanism visible here in qualitative form, where the conviction that all action is worship generated prosocial conduct: mutual help, valuing peers, guarding speech, and resolving difference through reasoning and forgiveness. These observations support the centrality of *al-akhlāq al-karīmah* in Islamic education, in which ethics is the outward demonstration of inner faith: because every act is felt to be spiritually charged and subject to divine judgment, moral behavior becomes self-governed rather than externally imposed.

Theoretical contribution

The contribution can be stated in three moves. *Confirmation.* The study validates the Islamic-personality-psychology framework in which Muslim personality integrates spiritual, psychological, and social life:³⁷ worship, teacher conduct, and spiritual mentoring jointly developed learners' spirituality and social ethics. It further evidences al-Attas's claim that *adab* is refined gradually through consistent practice and the teacher's example.³⁸

Extension. It extends pesantren-based and formal-school accounts of character education to the under-studied case of migrant children in non-formal education under a diaspora state institution (KBRI KL).³⁹ Character education in non-formal settings has been recognized as a distinct and effective site for vulnerable young people, but has clustered in sports and community programs and rarely in religious formation for migrant children;⁴⁰ this study supplies that missing case. Even under financial and staffing constraints, the core principles were upheld, and scheduled religious habituation enabled

³⁵ Rivauzi et al., "Integration of Sufi Epistemology and Adherence to the Sharia: A Model for Mainstreaming the Moderation of Islamization at Madrasah Tarbiyah Islamiyah, Indonesia."

³⁶ Hasan Basri et al., "Tarbiyyah Ruhiyyah and Deviant Behavior in Islamic Schools: An Empirical Sem-Based Study," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 14, no. 1 SE-Articles (n.d.): 371–92, <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v14i1.2549>.

³⁷ Surbakti, Harahap, and Hasanah, "Future Perspectives on the Islamic Personality Model: Integrating Spiritual, Moral, Intellectual, Social, Personal, and Behavioral Dimensions for Holistic Development."

³⁸ al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*.

³⁹ Hasibuan et al., "Sufistic Approach of Character Education in an Indonesian Islamic Boarding School"; Niswah et al., "Analisis Peran Lembaga Pendidikan Pesantren Dalam Membangun Karakter Dan Ilmu Pengetahuan"; Islamic et al., "Character Education through Philosophical Values in Traditional Islamic Boarding Schools."

⁴⁰ Díaz, "Character Education with Vulnerable Children and Adolescents in Non-Formal Contexts: A Systematic Review."

the institution to play a more active role than migrant families, who were limited by their working conditions.

Modification. It qualifies the assumption that effective Islamic character education depends on formal institutional status and abundant resources. Formation succeeded through close teacher–learner relationships, modeling, and consistent instruction in values. The multicultural diaspora environment did not restrict internalization; it offered a productive space for a religious character that is tolerant and inclusive, while firmly grounded in Islam, consistent with evidence that diaspora Muslim youth can hold a religious identity that is both distinct and open to others.⁴¹

Practical implications

Three implications follow, kept separate from the theoretical claims above. First, because effectiveness rested on the teacher's example and consistent habituation, teachers need sustained capacity-building in Islamic character pedagogy and in individual mentoring, which the current staffing does not allow. Second, because character is unevenly carried beyond PKBM, parents should be more deliberately drawn into the formation process through structured home reinforcement and school–family communication. Third, the institution would benefit from an integrated, community-appropriate Islamic character-education curriculum that formalizes the fusion of spiritual reflection and social ethics already practiced informally.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations bound these findings. First, the study involved 12 participants at a single institution; the findings are context-dependent and not broadly generalizable, though the thick description supports transferability to similar settings. Second, it examined one type of non-formal provision, so variation across others (SIKL, community learning centers, guidance centers) is not captured. Third, family members were not participants, leaving the link between home parenting and PKBM's character education unexplored. Fourth, phenomenology relies on self-report, so socially desirable responding cannot be excluded; despite triangulation and member-checking, longitudinal or ethnographic work is needed to trace development over time. Fifth, the participant excerpts are member-checked, reconstructed narrative accounts rather than verbatim

⁴¹ Essid, “The Youth of Muslim Diaspora and Identity Markers: The Crossroads of School, Religion, and Society”; Anas et al., “Local Wisdom as Social Regulation: The Role of Anjangsana Tradition in Shaping Interfaith Tolerance in Rural Indonesia.”

transcriptions; member-checking limits the risk of misrepresentation, but verbatim transcription remains the stronger evidentiary standard for phenomenological research and should be adopted if the recordings are re-accessed.

Future research should compare the educational systems serving Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia to isolate how institutional characteristics shape delivery; follow learners longitudinally after enrolment; examine home-based character education and its integration with the institution; develop and test a diaspora-tailored model of Islamic character education; and complement the qualitative account with validated instruments measuring change in spiritual awareness, social ethics, and character.

Conclusion

Islamic character education at PKBM PNF Kuala Lumpur reshaped the character of migrant children by combining spiritual self-reflection with social ethics. Habitual worship, Islamic study, and *muḥāsabah* deepened religious awareness and introspection, while teacher exemplification and *adab* mentoring produced courteous, caring, and responsible conduct. The central insight is that these two processes, though analytically separable, reinforce one another in practice, yielding a character that is spiritually grounded, emotionally regulated, and socially aware, visible in learners' daily behavior and stated in their own words. Effectiveness remained bounded by limited institutional capacity and uneven reinforcement at home. Theoretically, the study validates an integrated Islamic-personality model, extends al-Attas's *ta'dīb* to migrant children's non-formal education, and shows that program success rests on regular habituation, the teacher's example, and the deliberate blending of spiritual and social values. PKBM PNF is thus not merely a service provider but also a strategic site for character formation and the reinforcement of Islamic identity, and a basis for a more adaptive model of Islamic character education in diaspora.

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Ethical Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with institutional research ethics principles. Formal permission to conduct the research was obtained through a research permit application (No. 423/1.03/R/UNISYA/V/2026). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants (and from parents or guardians where participants were minors). Participant confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Author Contributions (CRediT)

Sarah Lady Diana Islamy: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft. Ahmad Hafidz Lubis: Validation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision. Haidar Idris: Resources, Investigation, Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Claude. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the published article.

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