

Habituation-Based Character Education in Islamic Primary Schools: Integrating the 7 Habits Framework within the Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract

Despite widespread adoption of character education programs in Indonesian Islamic primary schools, a persistent gap remains in understanding how global character frameworks can be systematically integrated with local religious curricula to produce holistic student development. While habituation-based approaches have shown promise for fostering discipline and religiosity, existing studies predominantly describe isolated practices without examining the conceptual mechanisms that enable sustainable integration between daily routines and formal religious instruction. This study addresses this lacuna by investigating the implementation of the "7 Habits of Great Children" framework within Islamic Religious Education (PAI) under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. Drawing on qualitative data from classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis at a purposively selected madrasah, we develop an empirically grounded model demonstrating how structured habituation practices, including communal worship, health routines, and social courtesies, can be theoretically synchronized with PAI learning objectives to create mutually reinforcing character development pathways. Our findings reveal that the integration operates through three conceptual mechanisms: (1) behavioral scaffolding, wherein daily routines provide embodied foundations for abstract religious concepts; (2) contextual bridging, where teachers deliberately connect habituation experiences with PAI content to enhance meaning-making; and (3) environmental synergy, characterized by coordinated reinforcement across school and home settings. The study contributes to character education scholarship by offering a transferable framework for harmonizing universal character principles with culturally situated religious instruction, thereby extending the applicability of habituation theory beyond single-institution implementations. These insights carry implications for curriculum designers and educators seeking to operationalize value-based education within flexible, student-centered learning environments.

Keywords: 7 Habits of Great Children, Islamic Education, Merdeka Curriculum

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Introduction

Character education in primary schools has become a central concern in educational policy worldwide, driven by growing recognition that academic achievement alone insufficiently prepares students for civic and moral life. In response, schools globally have adopted structured character frameworks—ranging from Seligman's positive psychology interventions to Covey's 7 Habits model—designed to cultivate dispositions such as responsibility, collaboration, and self-regulation (Ansori et al., 2024; Dempster, 2020; Hasriani et al., 2025; Jalilov et al., 2025; Samudra Kushariyadi et al., 2024). However, a persistent critique in this literature concerns the "implementation gap": while these frameworks are widely adopted, evidence regarding how they integrate with subject-specific instruction to produce sustainable behavioral change remains underdeveloped (Kristjánsson, 2021). Specifically, the mechanisms through which universal

character principles become meaningfully embedded within culturally and religiously situated curricula—particularly in non-Western educational contexts—have received insufficient theoretical and empirical attention.

This gap is especially pronounced in Islamic primary education, where character formation (*tarbiyah akhlak*) constitutes a foundational objective alongside cognitive development (Harahap et al., 2025; Hasnahwati et al., 2025; Khaidir et al., 2020; Ridwan, 2025; Warsahı et al., 2024). Existing studies on habituation-based character programs in Indonesian madrasahs predominantly describe what practices are enacted—such as communal prayer, Quranic recitation, or morning routines—without examining the conceptual architecture that enables these practices to translate into stable character dispositions (Hidayah et al., 2025). Consequently, three analytical limitations persist in current scholarship. First, the literature lacks theoretically grounded models explaining how daily habituation routines interface with formal religious instruction to produce integrated rather than fragmented learning experiences. Second, while Covey's 7 Habits framework has been adapted in various Indonesian schools, its theoretical compatibility with Islamic educational objectives—particularly regarding the formation of *akhlak* (moral character) and *ibadah* (worship practices)—remains undertheorized. Third, most studies remain institutionally bound, offering thick descriptions of single-school implementations without extracting transferable principles for broader application in diverse Islamic educational settings.

To address these limitations, this study draws upon an integrative theoretical framework combining habituation theory, situated learning theory, and character education scholarship. From Aristotelian and contemporary habituation perspectives, we understand character not as knowledge to be transmitted but as a disposition cultivated through repeated practice in meaningful contexts (Han, 2024). Buttarazzi & Sinha (2025) situated learning theory extends this by emphasizing that learning occurs through legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice, suggesting that habituation routines function as "embodied curricula" where students develop character through participation rather than direct instruction. Finally, Lickona's (2013) comprehensive approach to character education highlights the necessity of aligning three domains: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action—a tripartite framework particularly compatible with Islamic educational objectives that emphasize cognitive understanding, spiritual disposition, and behavioral embodiment (*'ilm, hal, 'amal*). Within this theoretical architecture, Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People—adapted here as the "7 Habits of Great Children"—offers a structured vocabulary for operationalizing proactive, principle-centered behavior. However, unlike its original corporate-individualist context, this study critically repositions the framework within collectivist, faith-based educational environments where character development is oriented toward *taqwa* (God-consciousness) and social responsibility rather than personal effectiveness alone.

Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum provides an apt policy context for examining this theoretical integration. Unlike its predecessor, which emphasized standardized content coverage, the Merdeka Curriculum grants schools substantial autonomy to design "independent learning" (*merdeka belajar*) that aligns local values with national competency frameworks (Amiruddin et al., 2023; Zainuddin, 2025). For Islamic Religious Education (PAI), this flexibility creates opportunities to move beyond didactic instruction toward experiential, habituation-based approaches that connect classroom content with students' embodied daily practices. MI Nidhamiyah Ketompen Probolinggo represents an instrumental case where the "7 Habits of Great Children" program has been systematically enacted over multiple academic years, offering fertile ground for investigating how theoretical principles translate into pedagogical practice.

This study investigates the implementation of the "7 Habits of Great Children" within PAI learning through three theoretically informed research questions: (1) What conceptual mechanisms enable the integration of habituation routines with formal PAI instruction? (2) How do teachers navigate the theoretical tension between universal character principles and Islamic

educational objectives? (3) What transferable model emerges for implementing habituation-based character education in diverse Islamic primary school contexts? By addressing these questions, the study advances existing knowledge by developing an empirically grounded, theoretically informed model of character education integration, one that speaks to scholars and practitioners beyond the immediate Indonesian context.

Method

This study employed a qualitative instrumental case study methodology (Sugiyono, 2019) to investigate how the "7 Habits of Great Children" integrates with Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, prioritizing analytical rather than statistical generalization. Fieldwork was conducted over 16 weeks (February–May 2024) comprising 42 days of on-site observation at MI Nidhamiyah Ketompen Probolinggo, a private Islamic primary school in East Java, purposively selected based on three criteria: formal adoption of the 7 Habits program integrated with PAI curriculum, minimum two-year implementation history, and administrative willingness to accommodate intensive observational access. Data were collected through 28 observation sessions of morning habituation routines, PAI classroom lessons, and school-wide character activities; semi-structured interviews with 22 participants lasting 35–75 minutes each; and document analysis, including lesson plans, behavior monitoring records, and policy documents. The first author, a former PAI teacher with insider knowledge of Islamic primary education, conducted primary data collection with reflexive journaling to document assumptions and potential biases, while the second author provided an external perspective through independent observation of 6 sessions and peer challenge sessions throughout analysis. Two researchers independently coded 20% of data (Cohen's kappa = 0.84), with discrepancies resolved through discussion, and negative case analysis actively sought disconfirming evidence to challenge emerging interpretations.

Data analysis followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework conducted manually through iterative reading and systematic coding, proceeding from initial open coding of 347 discrete units through thematic generation, review, and refinement into six final analytical themes: behavioral scaffolding, contextual bridging, environmental synergy, teacher embodiment, student meaning-making, and implementation challenges. Trustworthiness was operationalized through four-dimensional triangulation (sources, methods, investigators, theories), member checking with 8 key informants, peer debriefing with three external researchers, and comprehensive audit trail documentation. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (reference: 2024/Ed/047), with written informed consent from adult participants and parental guardians, student assent through age-appropriate explanation, pseudonymization of all identities, encrypted data storage with scheduled destruction five years post-publication, and findings shared with the school through summary report and presentation as reciprocity for participation.

Table 1. Participant Profile and Selection Rationale

Role	Number	Selection Criteria
PAI Teachers	2	Primary architects of 7 Habits-PAI integration; minimum 3 years of experience
Homeroom Teachers	3	Direct implementation of habituation routines across grade levels
School Principal	1	Institutional leadership and policy oversight
Students	12	Grades 4–6 (ages 9–12); stratified by gender and observed engagement levels
Parents	4	Selected through teacher nomination based on varying levels of home involvement

The participant profile reflects purposive and theoretical sampling strategies designed to capture diverse perspectives on program implementation while achieving theoretical saturation. PAI teachers and homeroom teachers constituted primary informants given their direct role in enacting the integration between habituation routines and formal instruction, with the principal providing institutional context. Student selection across three grade levels enabled developmental comparison, while parent sampling based on varying home involvement levels specifically addressed the study's interest in environmental synergy between school and home contexts. The total of 22 participants, engaged through 28 observations and extended fieldwork duration, provided sufficient data volume for the six-phase thematic analysis that generated 347 initial codes consolidated into six theoretically grounded themes, with inter-coder reliability establishing analytical rigor and negative case analysis ensuring interpretive validity beyond confirmatory bias.

Results and Discussion

Results

1. Behavioral Scaffolding: Embodied Foundations for Religious Learning

The integration of the "7 Habits of Great Children" with PAI learning operates through what we term *behavioral scaffolding*, wherein daily habituation routines function as embodied precursors that prepare students cognitively and spiritually for formal religious instruction. This mechanism is most evident in the morning ritual sequence observed across 12 fieldwork sessions: students' arrival, salat dhuha performance, communal dhikr, tadarus, and teacher guidance constitute not merely discrete activities but an interconnected behavioral system. Rather than treating these routines as programmatic formalities, teachers deliberately position them as *somatic grounding* for subsequent PAI lessons, which the PAI teacher Soraya described as creating "mental calmness" that enables focused engagement with Islamic concepts.

The salat dhuha practice illustrates this scaffolding mechanism most prominently. Observational data reveal a developmental trajectory: initial sessions showed students requiring explicit teacher direction for prayer preparation, while later observations documented autonomous performance characterized by disciplined posture and sustained concentration. This shift from external regulation to internalized practice represents what habituation theory identifies as the transition from *hexis* (repeated action) to *ethos* (stable disposition). Critically, teachers explicitly connected this embodied discipline to PAI learning objectives—framing the prayer's structural elements (intention, sequence, reflection) as analogues for the "begin with the end in mind" habit, thereby transforming physical routine into a conceptual bridge.

However, this scaffolding mechanism also reveals a tension between individual and collective religious formation. While morning routines emphasized synchronized, communal worship, subsequent PAI lessons often shifted toward individualized doctrinal understanding. This pattern—what we characterize as *rhythm discontinuity*—suggests that behavioral scaffolding's effectiveness depends on teachers' explicit bridging between embodied experience and abstract content, a connection that was consistently present in observed lessons but required deliberate instructional labor. The monitoring book data (n=47 student records) further complicate this pattern: students scoring highest on "worship habit consistency" did not automatically demonstrate corresponding gains in "religious concept comprehension," indicating that behavioral scaffolding, while necessary, remains insufficient for integrated character formation without the second mechanism we identify as contextual bridging.



Figure 1. Students Performing Salat Dhuha at MI Nidhamiyah Ketompen Probolinggo
(The image shows students performing salat dhuha as part of their daily habituation routine.)

Participant accounts corroborate and complicate the behavioral scaffolding mechanism identified through observation. The PAI teacher, Soraya's assertion that salat dhuha produces "mental calmness" and readiness to learn, illustrates what we term *embodied cognition transfer*, the process whereby physical ritual states enable subsequent cognitive engagement. However, homeroom teachers' emphasis on discipline and punctuality ("more orderly and rarely come late") introduces a divergent interpretive frame: for these teachers, morning routines primarily function as behavioral regulation rather than spiritual preparation. This variation in stakeholder meaning-making, what we characterize as *instrumental pluralism*, reveals that the same habituation practices serve multiple, not necessarily aligned, educational objectives depending on actor positionality.

Student voices further unsettle unilinear interpretations of behavioral scaffolding. Bimo's statement that prayer makes him "more excited to learn" suggests affective rather than merely cognitive mediation, while another student's observation that morning practices help "understand Islamic material more easily" indicates spontaneous *metacognitive bridging* that teachers did not explicitly design. These student-generated connections between embodied experience and classroom learning exceed the intentional scaffolding described by teachers, suggesting that habituation generates emergent pedagogical possibilities beyond programmed outcomes. Parent reports of behavioral transfer to home contexts ("remembers to pray more often," "behaves more politely") demonstrate what we term *environmental leakage*, the uncontrolled migration of school-habituated behaviors into domestic spaces. Yet this leakage is asymmetrical: parents noted increased worship frequency and courtesy, but not the "mental calmness" or "excitement to learn" emphasized by teachers and students, indicating that behavioral scaffolding's effects fragment rather than uniformly transfer across settings.

Social practices beyond formal worship, greeting rituals, peer sharing, and cleanliness maintenance extend behavioral scaffolding into *interactional habitus*, where courtesy becomes bodily automatism rather than deliberate moral choice. The healthy lunch initiative, ostensibly supporting physical well-being, operates as what we identify as *stealth habituation*: nutrition practices become vehicles for "put first things first" habit internalization without explicit moral didacticism. Triangulation across data sources confirms behavioral scaffolding's contribution to observable discipline, worship regularity, and social courtesy, yet also reveals *implementation drift*: teachers' differential emphasis (spiritual preparation versus behavioral regulation), students' spontaneous interpretive extensions, and parents' selective recognition of transferred behaviors. This drift does not indicate program failure but rather constitutes the inevitable condition of habituation-based education, wherein intended mechanisms fragment and recombine through multiple actor interpretations. The program's sustainability, we argue, depends not on eliminating this drift but on teachers' capacity to recognize and strategically leverage divergent stakeholder meanings toward convergent character objectives.

2. Contextual Bridging: Deliberate Connection Between Embodied Experience and Doctrinal Content

The second mechanism enabling integration between habituation and PAI learning is *contextual bridging*, a deliberate instructional strategy wherein teachers explicitly connect students' embodied morning routines with formal religious concepts. Unlike behavioral scaffolding, which operates through temporal sequencing (habituation preceding instruction), contextual bridging functions through *semantic linkage*, teachers' discursive practices that render morning experiences conceptually available for doctrinal elaboration. This mechanism transforms habituation from isolated routine into what we term a *pedagogical resource*, enabling students to draw upon somatic memory as epistemic ground for understanding abstract Islamic values.

Observational data reveal contextual bridging as a consistent pedagogical pattern across 10 PAI lessons. Each session commenced not with direct content delivery but with *reactivation rituals*: brief collective prayer and tadarus followed by "introductory discussion" explicitly designed to surface students' recent experiences. The teacher's discursive move, "remember yesterday morning when we...", functions as what situated learning theory identifies as *indexical referencing*, locating abstract concepts in participants' shared biographical moments. This practice addresses a fundamental tension in religious education: the gap between doctrinal universality (Islamic manners as transcendent principles) and experiential particularity (this student, this greeting, this morning). Contextual bridging collapses this gap by rendering the universal accessible through the particular, the abstract through the embodied.

The PAI teacher's reflection, "students understand faster because they experience it every day", articulates the cognitive mechanism underlying this bridge: *dual coding*, wherein procedural memory (habituated greeting performance) and semantic memory (doctrinal explanation of *akhlak*) become neurologically and conceptually intertwined. The exemplar case of Islamic manners instruction illustrates this process operationally. Rather than introducing courtesy as a decontextualized rule, the teacher invoked the morning's greeting ritual as a shared reference point, asking students to recall their bodily sensations and social perceptions during the practice. This *retrospective phenomenological bracketing*, inviting students to attend to their own habitualized experience, transforms unreflective routine into an object of conscious moral analysis. Students could then generalize from specific instance ("when I greeted Ustadz this morning") toward a categorical principle ("Islamic respect transcends hierarchical status"), with their own embodied performance serving as validating evidence.

Yet contextual bridging also generates what we identify as *theory-practice compression*: the collapsing of complex doctrinal nuance into simplified behavioral referents. In observed lessons, the multidimensional Islamic concept of *adab* (encompassing intention, proportionality, contextual sensitivity, and spiritual orientation) was recurrently reduced to observable courtesy behaviors already habituated in morning routines. This compression facilitates comprehension but potentially truncates moral reasoning development. The monitoring book data reveal this limitation: students demonstrated high proficiency in identifying "correct" manners (matching morning behaviors) but struggled when presented with hypothetical scenarios requiring contextual judgment beyond routine application. Contextual bridging thus operates as a *necessary but bounded* mechanism, effective for initial concept accessibility but requiring supplementation through the third mechanism we identify as environmental synergy to achieve full character integration.

meaningfulness is not an inherent property of the approach but a contingent achievement of specific pedagogical labor under favorable organizational conditions.

3. Environmental Synergy: Distributed Character Formation Across Institutional Boundaries

The integration of habituation and PAI learning achieves its most robust form through *environmental synergy*, a mechanism wherein character development emerges not from any single practice or instructional moment but from the *orchestrated convergence* of multiple social settings, actor groups, and activity systems. This mechanism transcends the classroom-bound scope of behavioral scaffolding and contextual bridging, operating instead through what we term *ecological meshing*, the deliberate coordination of school routines, family practices, and community expectations toward convergent character objectives. The morning exercise session exemplifies this mechanism's complexity: while ostensibly promoting physical health (a "7 Habits" objective), its integration with PAI learning operates through *biophysical priming* rather than direct semantic connection. The PAI teacher's observation that physical refreshment enables better lesson absorption identifies a *somatic-cognitive pathway* distinct from, yet complementary to, the embodied-procedural pathway of behavioral scaffolding and the semantic-discursive pathway of contextual bridging.

The exercise case further reveals environmental synergy's *multi-actor validation structure*. Homeroom teachers emphasized affective outcomes ("more cheerful and active"), students highlighted motivational states ("more enthusiastic about learning"), and parents noted domestic behavioral transfer ("improved health and discipline"). This polyphonic interpretation, what we characterize as *distributed sense-making*, does not indicate measurement inconsistency but rather the mechanism's inherent multiplicity. Environmental synergy's effectiveness derives precisely from its capacity to sustain divergent stakeholder interpretations (physical, emotional, motivational, behavioral) while maintaining convergent directional pressure toward character development. Unlike behavioral scaffolding and contextual bridging, which require relatively controlled instructional environments, environmental synergy thrives on *productive ambiguity*: the exercise session's meaning remains intentionally under-specified, allowing teachers, students, and parents to invest it with significance appropriate to their respective contexts while contributing to collective character formation.

Yet this same ambiguity generates what we identify as *coordination fragility*. The mechanism's success depends on sustained alignment across school and home settings, an alignment that observation and interview data reveal as partial and effortful rather than automatic. Parents reported improved discipline, but their accounts emphasized behavioral compliance (sleep schedules, eating habits) rather than the character dispositions (proactivity, prioritization) emphasized by teachers. This *interpretive divergence*, stakeholders pulling the same behavioral practices toward different characterological ends, remains latent rather than manifest, surfacing only when explicit coordination attempts (parent-teacher meetings, monitoring book reviews) render tacit assumptions visible. The program's "seamless integration," we argue, is not discovered but *accomplished* through continuous relational labor that masks its own constructedness, presenting as natural synergy what is in fact achieved articulation.



Figure 3. Morning Exercise Activities at MI Nidhamiyah Ketompen Probolinggo
(The image shows morning exercise activities that support students' physical readiness and overall discipline.)

The theoretical proposition that habituation and academic learning "must operate hand in hand", while intuitively compelling, obscures the specific *configurations* through which this operation occurs. Our analysis reveals not a singular integrated model but what we term *differentiated integration*: three distinct mechanisms (behavioral scaffolding, contextual bridging, environmental synergy) that vary in their activation conditions, temporal dynamics, and susceptibility to disruption. This conceptual refinement challenges holistic character education frameworks that assume seamless compatibility between embodied practice and doctrinal instruction, instead demonstrating that integration requires *continuous pedagogical labor* to maintain alignment across mechanisms that naturally tend toward fragmentation.

Triangulation across data sources confirms each mechanism's empirical presence, yet also reveals *mechanism-specific vulnerabilities* not captured by aggregate assessments of "habituation enhancement." Behavioral scaffolding showed the highest fidelity to intended design but limited transfer beyond immediate instructional contexts; contextual bridging demonstrated robust comprehension effects but generated theory-practice compression that truncated moral reasoning complexity; environmental synergy achieved the broadest stakeholder engagement but exhibited coordination fragility requiring ongoing relational maintenance. These patterned variations suggest that evaluating "the effectiveness of PAI instruction" through undifferentiated measures risks *mechanism masking*, attributing success or failure to the program as a whole rather than to specific components requiring targeted refinement.

The conclusion that students "not only comprehend Islamic values but also internalize and practice them daily" thus requires theoretical qualification. "Internalization" in our data operates not as a unitary psychological state but as a *mechanism-dependent disposition*: behavioral scaffolding produces somatic-automatic internalization (courtesy as bodily habit), contextual bridging generates cognitive-associative internalization (manners as conceptually linked to Islamic doctrine), while environmental synergy fosters socio-relational internalization (health practices as identity performance across settings). These dispositions do not necessarily converge; a student may exhibit polite automatism without doctrinal understanding, or conceptual mastery without behavioral consistency. The "comprehensive system" we identify is therefore not characterized by guaranteed coherence but by *productive tension* among mechanisms that teachers must strategically navigate rather than assume naturally harmonized.

Conclusion

This study advances character education theory by developing a mechanism-based model identifying three distinct processes, behavioral scaffolding, contextual bridging, and environmental synergy, through which habituation and formal instruction integrate within culturally situated religious education. This framework extends beyond holistic assertions toward an analytically precise understanding of how global frameworks like Covey's *7 Habits* undergo

discursive hybridization when localized in faith-based traditions, revealing agentive appropriation rather than imperialist imposition or resistant localization. For curriculum reform, our analysis exposes a flexibility paradox: the Merdeka Curriculum's autonomy enables innovation but generates coordination costs requiring substantial relational infrastructure that decentralized systems must differentially resource to prevent equity gaps.

Limitations bound these contributions and indicate future directions. The single-site, 16-week design enables intensive mechanism identification but restricts generalizability and precludes longitudinal developmental assessment; comparative case studies across diverse institutional settings and longitudinal tracking of cohorts are needed to test boundary conditions and durability. Methodological constraints include primary observer reliance and the absence of objective behavioral measures, suggesting mixed-methods designs for subsequent inquiry.

Policy implications center on infrastructure investment for effective curricular flexibility: professional learning communities for teacher calibration, home-school partnership protocols extending beyond information-sharing, and monitoring systems tracking mechanism-specific quality rather than mere compliance. For Islamic primary education specifically, global-local integration proves achievable when global frameworks are explicitly subordinated to indigenous moral teleology. The study ultimately contributes not by confirming that habituation enhances learning, but by specifying how enhancement operates, what sustains it, and what threatens its coherence, enabling informed design of character education that integrates embodied practice with formal instruction in culturally responsive, theoretically principled ways.

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