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Nurturing Moral Excellence: Character Education Through Islamic Traditional Boarding School Model at Pondok Pesantren As'adiyah Sengkang

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Abstract

Character education represents a fundamental cornerstone of Islamic educational institutions, particularly in the traditional boarding school system known as pondok pesantren in Indonesia. This article examines the distinctive approach to character education implemented at Pondok Pesantren As'adiyah Sengkang, one of the oldest and most influential Islamic educational institutions in South Sulawesi. Drawing upon contemporary scholarship in Islamic education and character development, this conceptual analysis explores how As'adiyah integrates traditional Islamic pedagogy with holistic character formation to cultivate moral excellence among students. The discussion encompasses two primary dimensions: first, the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of character education at As'adiyah, examining how Islamic values and pesantren traditions shape educational practice; second, the implementation strategies and distinctive features that characterize As'adiyah's approach to nurturing student character. The analysis reveals that As'adiyah's success in character education stems from the comprehensive integration of formal curriculum, informal mentoring, residential community life, and spiritual development within a supportive Islamic learning environment.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has emerged as a critical priority for educational institutions worldwide as societies grapple with moral challenges, including declining civility, increasing materialism, and erosion of ethical foundations in personal and public life. While secular educational systems debate appropriate approaches to character education that respect pluralism and avoid religious indoctrination, Islamic educational institutions have rich traditions of moral formation grounded in comprehensive worldviews that integrate intellectual, spiritual, and ethical development. The pondok pesantren system in Indonesia is one of the most enduring and influential models of Islamic education, with roots dating back centuries and continuing vitality across thousands of institutions serving millions of students nationwide. According to Hefner (2020), pesantren have historically served as centers not merely of religious instruction but of comprehensive character formation, cultivating qualities of piety, humility, discipline, social responsibility, and ethical commitment essential for Islamic life. These institutions demonstrate that effective character education requires more than discrete lessons in values or ethics; it demands holistic educational environments in which moral formation permeates every aspect of the student experience.

Pondok Pesantren As'adiyah, located in Sengkang, South Sulawesi, represents one of Indonesia's most historically significant and educationally innovative Islamic boarding schools. (Muhsyanur, 2025). Founded in 1930 by the renowned Islamic scholar Muhammad As'ad al-Bugisi, As'adiyah has grown from a small traditional Islamic school into a comprehensive educational institution offering programs from elementary through university levels while maintaining a strong commitment to traditional pesantren values and pedagogical approaches. The institution has gained recognition not only for academic excellence but particularly for its success in character formation, producing generations of graduates known for strong moral character, religious commitment, and social leadership. Azra (2021) identifies As'adiyah as among the pesantren that have successfully balanced tradition and modernity, maintaining classical Islamic educational methods while adapting to contemporary educational demands and opportunities. This balance enables As'adiyah to address both timeless dimensions of character formation and specific moral challenges facing contemporary Muslim youth.

The philosophical foundations of character education at As'adiyah rest on Islamic conceptions of human nature, purpose, and development that differ significantly from the secular Western frameworks that dominate contemporary character education discourse. Islamic anthropology understands humans as created with innate potential for both good and evil, requiring proper education and spiritual discipline to actualize positive potentials while controlling negative inclinations. The ultimate purpose of human life, from an Islamic perspective, is to know, worship, and serve God through ethical conduct and social contribution, making character development inseparable from spiritual development. This integrated understanding shapes As'adiyah's approach to character education, which does

not separate moral formation from religious instruction or intellectual development but understands these as interconnected dimensions of comprehensive Islamic education. Halstead (2020) emphasizes that Islamic character education aims not merely to develop individual virtues but to form persons who embody Islamic ideals of *adab*—a comprehensive concept encompassing proper behavior, refined character, ethical conduct, and spiritual awareness across all aspects of life.

The residential nature of pesantren education provides unique opportunities for character formation that are unavailable in day schools, where students' time in the educational environment is limited. At As'adiyah, students live within the pesantren community 24 hours a day, creating an immersive educational environment where every aspect of daily life becomes an opportunity for moral learning and character development. This residential model enables what might be called "total education" where formal classroom instruction combines with informal learning through communal living, religious practices, extracurricular activities, and ongoing interaction with teachers and peers. The constant presence of role models, continuous moral guidance, peer influence toward positive behaviors, and immediate feedback on conduct create powerful conditions for character formation. Noor (2021) observes that pesantren's residential character enables the development of qualities difficult to cultivate in limited classroom time, including self-discipline, delayed gratification, consideration for others, conflict-resolution skills, and habits of religious observance that require sustained practice and social reinforcement.

The relationship between teacher and student in the pesantren tradition differs markedly from typical modern educational relationships, emphasizing not merely knowledge transmission but comprehensive mentoring and character modeling. The *kyai* (pesantren leader and head teacher) and other *ustadz* (teachers) serve not only as instructors but as spiritual guides and moral exemplars whose influence extends far beyond classroom instruction. Students develop deep bonds of loyalty and respect toward teachers, viewing them as sources not only of knowledge but of wisdom and spiritual blessing. This relationship creates powerful conditions for character formation through identification with admired role models and the desire to emulate teachers' qualities. However, this traditional authority structure also raises questions about autonomy, critical thinking, and potential for abuse that contemporary educators must address. Lukens-Bull (2020) argues that while pesantren teacher-student relationships provide valuable mentoring unavailable in more impersonal modern schools, they must evolve to incorporate greater dialogue, mutual respect, and space for student agency while maintaining beneficial dimensions of traditional mentoring.

The curriculum at As'adiyah integrates traditional Islamic sciences with modern academic subjects, creating a comprehensive educational program that addresses both classical religious knowledge and the contemporary competencies required for successful

life in modern Indonesia. Islamic studies curriculum includes Quranic recitation and memorization, hadith studies, Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic language, Islamic history, and theology—all taught using classical texts and traditional pedagogical methods. The modern curriculum encompasses Indonesian language, English, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, and vocational subjects taught using contemporary teaching approaches. This dual curriculum reflects As'adiyah's commitment to producing graduates who are both religiously knowledgeable and academically competent, capable of religious leadership and professional success. However, character education is integrated primarily not through discrete subject matter but through pedagogical approaches, community life, and institutional culture that infuse all educational activities with moral purpose and ethical reflection.

The broader context of Indonesian Islamic education reform shapes As'adiyah's approach to character education as pesantren nationwide navigate tensions between tradition and modernity, religious authenticity and national integration, and local cultural identity and global Islamic movements. Indonesian government policy increasingly emphasizes character education across all educational sectors, aligning state educational priorities with pesantren's traditional strength in moral formation. However, government character education initiatives often emphasize nationalist values and civic virtues alongside religious character, requiring pesantren to articulate how Islamic character formation relates to national citizenship and multicultural social participation. Van Bruinessen (2022) observes that contemporary Indonesian pesantren increasingly emphasize moderate Islam, tolerance, and civic engagement as dimensions of Islamic character, responding both to government pressure and to internal commitments among many pesantren leaders to counter extremist interpretations of Islam and to promote an Islam compatible with democracy and pluralism.

Looking forward, As'adiyah faces both opportunities and challenges in maintaining effective character education amid rapid social change, technological transformation, and evolving student backgrounds and expectations. Contemporary students arrive at pesantren with different experiences, values, and challenges than previous generations, shaped by social media, consumer culture, and urban lifestyles that may conflict with traditional pesantren values and norms. Technology offers new tools for Islamic education and character development, but also creates distractions and exposes students to influences that may undermine moral formation. As'adiyah must navigate these challenges while preserving core commitments to character education and pedagogical approaches that have proven effective over decades. The institution's success will depend on its capacity to adapt wisely, discerning which traditional practices remain valuable and which require modification, what new approaches might enhance character education, and how to engage contemporary students while maintaining educational integrity and moral clarity.

DISCUSSIONS

Philosophical and Pedagogical Foundations of Character Education at As'adiyah

The Islamic philosophical framework underpinning character education at As'adiyah Sengkang emphasizes tarbiyah—comprehensive education and upbringing that encompasses intellectual, moral, spiritual, and physical development as integrated dimensions of human formation. This holistic understanding contrasts with secular educational approaches that often separate intellectual development from moral and spiritual dimensions, or treat character education as an add-on to the core academic curriculum. From an Islamic perspective, true education must address the whole person, cultivating not merely knowledge and skills but wisdom, virtue, and a relationship with God. Rosnani and Suhailah (2020) explain that tarbiyah aims to produce the ideal Muslim, characterized by balanced development across all human dimensions—a person who possesses religious knowledge, embodies Islamic ethics, contributes positively to society, and maintains conscious awareness of God in all actions. This comprehensive educational vision shapes As'adiyah's approach, where character formation is not an isolated program but a pervasive dimension of the entire educational enterprise.

The concept of akhlaq (moral character or ethical conduct) occupies a central position in As'adiyah's educational philosophy, drawing upon the rich Islamic tradition of virtue ethics, emphasizing the cultivation of praiseworthy character traits and the elimination of blameworthy qualities. Classical Islamic scholars developed sophisticated frameworks of virtues and vices based on Quranic teachings, prophetic example, and philosophical reflection on human excellence. These frameworks identify core virtues, including honesty, humility, patience, generosity, courage, justice, and compassion, while warning against vices such as lying, arrogance, impatience, greed, cowardice, and cruelty. Character education at As'adiyah aims to systematically cultivate these virtues through instruction in Islamic ethics, modeling by teachers and senior students, opportunities for practice in daily life, and spiritual disciplines that strengthen moral resolve. Suharto (2021) emphasizes that Islamic character education understands virtue development as requiring not merely intellectual knowledge of right and wrong but also spiritual purification that aligns the heart and will with ethical understanding, enabling persons to consistently choose good even when it is difficult or contrary to immediate self-interest.

The pedagogical approach employed at As'adiyah integrates traditional Islamic educational methods with selected modern teaching innovations, creating a distinctive synthesis that serves the goals of character formation. Traditional methods including sorogan (individual recitation to teacher), wetonan (collective listening to teacher's explanation of classical texts), and hafalan (memorization) remain central to Islamic studies curriculum, embodying values of teacher authority, textual fidelity, and disciplined effort that support character formation. These methods cultivate virtues of humility before knowledge,

respect for tradition, patience in learning, and perseverance through difficulty—all understood as aspects of good character. However, As'adiyah has also incorporated more interactive pedagogical approaches, such as discussion, project-based learning, and student-centered activities that develop complementary virtues, including critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership. Rizvi and Lingard (2021) observe that the most effective character education combines direct instruction in ethical principles with experiential learning opportunities where students practice virtues in authentic contexts and reflect on their moral development, precisely the integration that As'adiyah pursues.

The role of religious practices and spiritual disciplines in character formation is another distinctive dimension of As'adiyah's approach, grounding moral development in comprehensive Islamic spirituality rather than treating ethics as merely a social convention or a rational principle. Daily congregational prayers, Quranic recitation, optional spiritual practices, and observance of the Islamic ritual calendar create a rhythm of religious observance that reinforces moral teachings and cultivates spiritual awareness understood as the foundation for authentic virtue. These practices serve character education not merely as external requirements but as means of internal transformation, strengthening moral resolve, developing God-consciousness that motivates ethical conduct, and building habits of discipline and self-control essential for consistent virtuous behavior. The integration of spiritual and moral dimensions reflects Islamic understanding that character formation requires transforming the nafs (lower self or ego) through spiritual struggle and divine assistance, not merely through intellectual instruction or behavior modification. However, Maulidia (2023) cautions that emphasis on ritual observance must not substitute for genuine ethical conduct, noting that effective Islamic education cultivates both external religious practice and internal moral qualities that manifest in social relationships and ethical behavior beyond ritual contexts.

Implementation Strategies and Distinctive Features of As'adiyah's Character Education

The residential community structure at As'adiyah Sengkang fosters a comprehensive moral environment in which character is formed through immersion in Islamic educational culture rather than through limited classroom instruction. Students live in dormitories under the supervision of senior students and resident teachers, participating in communal life governed by explicit rules and implicit norms reflecting Islamic values and pesantren traditions. This residential arrangement enables consistent moral guidance, immediate responses to behavioral problems, positive peer influence, and the development of virtues that require sustained practice in a community context, including cooperation, consideration for others, conflict resolution, and self-regulation. The dormitory becomes a microcosm of the Islamic community where students learn to balance individual needs with communal welfare, practice religious obligations collectively, develop leadership through responsibility

for younger students, and form lifelong bonds based on shared values and experiences. Masyithah (2022) demonstrates that residential life in pesantren develops distinctive forms of social capital—networks of trust, shared values, and mutual obligation—that support ethical behavior both during pesantren education and throughout graduates' subsequent lives as they maintain connections with the pesantren community and fellow alums.

The apprenticeship model embedded in As'adiyah's educational structure fosters strong character through graduated responsibilities and close mentoring relationships between junior and senior students. New students enter pesantren at the bottom of an informal hierarchy and gradually progress through increased responsibility, privilege, and authority as they demonstrate academic mastery and moral development. Senior students serve as prefects, dormitory supervisors, and teaching assistants, gaining leadership experience while providing guidance and modeling for younger students. This system creates multiple levels of mentoring, where each student both receives guidance from those ahead and provides examples for those behind, distributing responsibility for character education throughout the student community rather than concentrating it solely with adult teachers. The apprenticeship model also enables personalized moral guidance as senior students often relate more easily with younger peers than adult teachers might, providing immediate feedback and relatable examples of virtue. However, Muhakamurrohman (2022) notes that peer leadership systems require careful adult supervision to prevent abuse, ensure alignment with institutional values, and support senior students who may lack the maturity to assume assigned responsibilities, suggesting that effective implementation requires ongoing training and oversight of student leaders.

The integration of local cultural values with Islamic teachings represents another distinctive feature of As'adiyah's character education, reflecting the institution's roots in the Bugis-Makassar culture of South Sulawesi. Rather than treating Islam and local culture as opposed, As'adiyah recognizes convergence between Islamic values and Bugis cultural emphasis on *siri* (shame/honor), *pacce* (empathy/compassion), and appropriate hierarchical relationships. This cultural integration makes Islamic character education resonate with local students and demonstrates the compatibility between Islamic identity and cultural heritage. For instance, the Bugis value of *siri*, which emphasizes personal and family honor, aligns with the Islamic emphasis on maintaining dignity and avoiding shameful behavior, reinforcing motivation for ethical conduct. The value of *pacce*, which encourages empathy and social responsibility, complements Islamic teachings on compassion and care for vulnerable members of society. By explicitly connecting Islamic and cultural values, As'adiyah helps students develop an integrated moral identity rather than experiencing tension between religious and cultural identities. Rahman (2020) argues that effective Islamic education in a diverse Indonesian context requires cultural contextualization that demonstrates Islam's universal principles through culturally specific expressions while

maintaining a critical perspective on cultural practices that may conflict with Islamic teachings, precisely the balanced approach As'adiyah pursues.

The emphasis on service and social contribution as dimensions of character development distinguishes As'adiyah's approach from character education focused primarily on individual virtue or personal piety. Students engage in various forms of community service, including teaching at affiliated elementary schools, leading religious programs in surrounding communities, participating in social welfare projects, and contributing to the maintenance and operations of pesantrens. These service activities provide practical contexts for developing the virtues of generosity, responsibility, leadership, and social awareness, while reinforcing Islamic teachings that faith requires social engagement and contribution to collective welfare. The service orientation also prepares students for expected roles as religious and community leaders following graduation, cultivating a sense of obligation to use education for social benefit rather than merely personal advancement. Extracurricular programs, including scouts, sports, arts, and student organizations, provide additional contexts for character development through teamwork, discipline, creative expression, and organizational leadership. Syafe'i (2020) emphasizes that comprehensive character education requires diverse learning contexts beyond classroom instruction, enabling students to practice virtues in varied situations and develop multifaceted moral capabilities applicable across different life domains, an insight that As'adiyah's program structure reflects in its integration of formal curriculum, residential life, religious practices, and service activities as complementary dimensions of holistic character formation.

CONCLUSION

Character education at Pondok Pesantren As'adiyah Sengkang demonstrates the power of comprehensive, values-based educational environments to cultivate moral excellence and ethical commitment among students. The institution's success stems from the integration of Islamic philosophical foundations emphasizing holistic human development, traditional pedagogical approaches that embody the values of discipline and respect, residential community life that provides total immersion in Islamic educational culture, and distinctive features such as apprenticeship relationships, cultural integration, and a service orientation. As'adiyah's approach illustrates that effective character education requires not discrete programs or isolated interventions, but a comprehensive educational environment where moral formation permeates all aspects of student experience—formal curriculum and informal learning, academic instruction and spiritual development, individual achievement and communal responsibility.

The institution navigates tensions between tradition and modernity, religious authenticity and contemporary relevance, and local cultural identity and universal Islamic principles through creative synthesis that honors heritage while adapting to changing circumstances. As educational systems worldwide recognize the inadequacy of purely

academic education and seek effective character education approaches, As'adiyah and similar Islamic boarding schools offer valuable models demonstrating that moral formation requires clear value foundations, supportive communities, exemplary mentors, consistent practice opportunities, and integration of intellectual, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of human development. The challenge for As'adiyah moving forward is maintaining its core character-education strengths while thoughtfully adapting to contemporary student needs and social changes, ensuring the institution continues to nurture moral excellence for new generations while remaining true to its founding vision and Islamic educational principles that have sustained the pesantren tradition across centuries.

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