



Character Building Through Hidden Curriculum: Caregivers' *Tahajjud* Exemplarity and Time Discipline in *Pesantren*

Akhmad Sahrandi^{1*}, Muhammad Taufiq², Diny Mahdany³, Kholid Ahmad Shabri Lubis³

^{1,2} Universitas Islam Internasional Darullughah Wadda'wah, Pasuruan, Indonesia

³ Institut Agama Islam Darul Ulum Kandangan, Hulu Sungai Selatan, Indonesia

⁴ Al-Wasathiyah University, Mukalla, Yemen

Email: sahrandi@gmail.com¹, wangitaufig@gmail.com², yahdiny.waafiny@gmail.com³, kholidlubis205@gmail.com⁴

*Corresponding Author

<p>Article Information: Received: 19 December 2025 Revised: 25 March 2026 Accepted: 4 April 2026 Published: 12 April 2026</p> <p>Keywords: Hidden Curriculum, Exemplary (<i>Uswatun Hasanah</i>), Character Education, <i>Pesantren</i>, <i>Tabajjud</i>.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Abstract</p> <p>The persistent gap between formal character instruction and the actual moral conduct of students often stems from a lack of authentic role modeling within the educational environment. This study examines the mechanisms and impact of caregivers' exemplary living (<i>uswatun hasanah</i>) as a form of hidden curriculum within <i>pesantren</i> character education. It focuses on three inquiries: the manifestation of exemplary behavior in <i>Tabajjud</i> rituals and time management; the internalization process among students and teachers; and its broader impact on community culture. Employing an ethnographic qualitative approach at At-Taqwa <i>Pesantren</i>, data were gathered through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary studies. Findings reveal three pillars of the hidden curriculum: authentic spiritual consistency in <i>Tabajjud</i>, time discipline as an expression of integrity, and transparent sincerity. These values are internalized through observational modeling, emotional identification, and behavioral normalization. Consequently, a mutually reinforcing educational ecosystem emerges, where exemplarity serves as the "soul" or ethos driving formal processes. This research concludes that effective character education relies heavily on an authentic, integrated hidden curriculum. Crucially, educational institutions must prioritize recruiting mentors who possess both academic competence and profound moral character, recognizing that every interaction and behavior serves as the most persuasive curriculum for student development.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

The realm of education—particularly Islamic education, which aspires to cultivate the 'perfected human' (*insan kamil*)—constantly grapples with a profound disconnect. There remains a persistent gap between the noble ideals enshrined in formal curricula and the lived reality of how character is actually forged on the ground (Minarti, 2022). While the transfer of cognitive knowledge often proceeds seamlessly, the deeper internalization of moral values, spirituality, and integrity remains a far more complex and delicate challenge (Muzammil et al., 2025). This is where we must recognize the profound power of the hidden curriculum—those values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes transmitted not through textbooks, but through culture, daily interactions, and the quiet weight of a lived example. It operates in silence, yet

its influence often runs deeper and lasts far longer than any written instruction ever could (Gofton & Regehr, 2006).

As one of the oldest Islamic educational traditions, the *Pesantren* offers a unique social laboratory for observing how these hidden curriculum dynamics truly come to life (Husna & Hamid, 2025). This uniqueness stems not only from a seamless continuity of tradition but, more importantly, from the pivotal role of the *pengasuh* (caregiver). Unlike teachers whose presence is often confined to classrooms and scheduled hours, these mentors share a communal life with their students around the clock. They serve as the very heartbeat of dormitory life—guardians of the daily rhythm and living mirrors of character, whom students observe and emulate in every waking moment (Fahham, 2020).

Deep initial observations at a particular *pesantren* revealed a phenomenon that is as compelling as it is inspiring. There, the caregivers carry out their roles with a palpable sense of sincerity, serving the community without seeking any material compensation from the institution. Beyond this altruism, they demonstrate an extraordinary consistency and discipline in their daily lives—both in their formal teaching and in nurturing the spiritual growth of the students. One of the most striking images is the nightly ritual of waking students for *Tabajjud* prayers. This is not done through shouting or coercion, but through quiet patience and personal example. Remarkably, this lived integrity does more than just shape the students; it profoundly resonates with the teachers as well, creating a ripple effect of devotion that touches everyone within the *pesantren* walls (Supendi et al., 2020). However, the implementation of this exemplary-based hidden curriculum is not without its internal frictions. The ethnographic data reveals that social systems in the dormitory do not always run smoothly. Despite the consistent and gentle modeling provided by the caregivers, the study observed instances of behavioral resistance among a minority of students. For some, the absence of harsh physical sanctions was occasionally exploited as a loophole; these students would feign sleep or provide repetitive excuses to avoid the 3:00 a.m. ritual, a phenomenon identified as ‘dormitory fatigue.’ Caregivers acknowledged that internalization is a non-linear process, and not all students respond immediately to quiet patience. In addressing these failures, the caregivers do not revert to punitive coercion but instead employ ‘relational redirection’ through private, heart-to-heart dialogues (*muwajabah*). This nuanced reality demonstrates that the ‘Integrated Dormitory Model’ is not a utopian vacuum, but a continuous negotiation between the caregiver’s idealism and the students’ diverse psychological readiness. Teachers openly acknowledge that their mentors serve as their primary source of inspiration, deeply anchoring their own commitment and sincerity in education. This phenomenon confirms that the most profound learning does not occur within the confines of a classroom, but rather through a living, authentic chain of exemplary character.

Despite its profound impact, such deeply rooted practice often eludes systematic academic scrutiny. It is frequently dismissed as a ‘given’—an inherent part of the *pesantren*’s spiritual ‘aura’—rather than being rigorously analyzed as a highly effective pedagogical method. Consequently, this study seeks to bridge that gap, shedding light on the silent yet powerful mechanics of this lived education (Muttaqin et al., 2024). Recent academic discourse on the hidden curriculum has increasingly focused on the structural and social

dimensions of character building in residential settings. Studies within the last decade have mapped how institutional climate and peer-to-peer interactions in both global boarding schools and Indonesian *pesantrens* serve as informal pedagogical drivers (Berkowitz, 2022). Furthermore, while contemporary research has explored the efficacy of formal adab-based instruction and the influence of charismatic leadership on student discipline (Rohman & Muhtamiroh, 2022), a significant vacuum remains regarding the specific, non-verbal internalization of a mentor's private spiritual rituals. Much of the existing literature—both in general education and Islamic educational management—tends to treat the spiritual presence of leadership as an intangible “aura” or a secondary atmospheric element rather than a deliberate, measurable instructional asset (Sahin, 2018). This is where a distinct research gap exists: there is a lack of systematic evidence exploring how the authentic consistency of a caregiver's personal life, particularly in *Tabajjud* devotion and time management, functions as a structured “living curriculum” that influences both staff and students. By moving beyond the mystical narrative of a “given” spiritual aura, this research provides a necessary ethnographic analysis of exemplarity as a rigorous pedagogical method. This paper seeks to delve into and bring to the surface the inner workings of the hidden curriculum as manifested through the lived examples of *pesantren* caregivers. The focus is directed toward two of the most striking expressions of this exemplary conduct: a profound commitment to spiritual rituals (*Tabajjud*) and an unwavering discipline in time management. Beyond mere observation, this study aims to dissect the underlying processes of this phenomenon—analyzing how values of sincerity, self-discipline, and responsibility are deeply internalized by both students and teachers. Furthermore, it explores the broader impact of these practices on the overall character formation and communal culture of the *pesantren*. Ultimately, this research does more than just document a “best practice”; it strives to provide a scholarly framework for understanding the most fundamental force in education: the transformative power of living by example.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach, specifically employing a mini-ethnographic design (Reeves et al., 2013). This method was chosen as the most fitting lens to uncover deep layers of meaning, understand intricate social processes, and interpret the phenomenon of “exemplarity” within its authentic, lived context—the daily rhythms of *pesantren* life. By utilizing a mini-ethnography, the research can focus intensively on a specific cultural thread—the hidden curriculum manifested through the caregiver's personal conduct—without the need to map the entire cultural landscape extensively. This allows for a more concentrated, nuanced, and profound analysis of how character is truly caught, not just taught, in the everyday interactions of the community (Husna & Hamid, 2025). To ensure the rigor required for ethnographic inquiry, the researcher conducted prolonged engagement through intensive passive participant observation for a duration of four months (September to December 2025). This period allowed for a comprehensive immersion into the daily rhythms from pre-dawn rituals to communal evaluations capturing the authentic curriculum as it naturally unfolded

The study is situated at At-Taqwa *Pesantren* (a pseudonym), a salaf-modern Islamic boarding school in East Java, selected through purposive sampling. This site was specifically chosen because it embodies a unique environment where the caregiver's leadership is not only deeply rooted but also systematically practiced and widely respected by both students and teachers. Such a setting provides an exceptionally information-rich case, offering profound insights into how exemplary living becomes a lived reality within an educational community (Belle, 2016). Data were gathered from a purposive sample of 15 key informants (N=15) who represent the core stakeholders. The distribution and profiles of the informants, all referred to by pseudonyms, are detailed in table 1.

Table 1. Distribution and Profile of Research Informants

Informant Category	Code/Pseudonym	N	Profile & Role in Research
Caregivers	CG-1, CG-2	2	Primary spiritual leaders (<i>Kiai/Nyai</i>)
Teachers	T-1 to T-5	5	Formal instructors residing on-site.
Senior Students	SS-1 to SS-6	6	Student leaders (<i>Ospedat</i>).
Boarding Leadership	L-1, L-2	2	Institutional policy & administrative heads.

To ensure the depth and integrity of the findings, data were gathered through three primary techniques, allowing for a thorough triangulation that strengthens the overall validity of the study (Thurmond, 2001). First, the study employed passive participant observation, where the researcher was present within the *pesantren's* daily life to witness the targeted routines firsthand. This included observing the gentle yet firm process of waking the students for *Tabajjud*, the caregivers' punctuality in beginning and concluding activities, and the subtle, informal interactions between mentors and students that occur naturally outside the structured hours (Wiles, 2003). The observations specifically targeted non-verbal cues, including behavioral patterns, body language, and the subtle, unspoken social dynamics within the environment. Complementing this, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing for a more fluid and personal dialogue with the participants (Eppich et al., 2019). The interview guides were designed with a flexible touch to uncover the deeper motivations behind the caregivers' sincerity and discipline. This approach allowed for a rich exploration of the emotional experiences and perceptions of both students and teachers as they witnessed these living examples of character, as well as the personal shifts in attitude they underwent. To ensure every nuance of these conversations was captured, all interviews were recorded and meticulously noted for detailed transcription (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). Third, Document Review, which involved examining *pesantren* schedules, student handbooks, and internal announcements. This analysis was crucial for triangulating and validating findings from observations and interviews, providing a clearer picture of the established norms and organizational structure (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

The collected data were processed using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, involving three simultaneous and interconnected workstreams (Asipi et al., 2022): The analytical process involves data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions, specifically executed through Thematic Analysis. After organizing interview transcripts and observation notes, I engaged in a repetitive, close reading of the material to identify initial codes. These codes were then woven into broader themes designed to address

the research questions. Several anticipated themes emerged, such as: “Sincerity (*Ikhlas*) as Intrinsic Motivation,” “Time Discipline as a Form of Worship and Responsibility,” “Learning Mechanisms through Observation and Imitation,” and “Value-Based Identity and Community Formation.” This analysis was inherently iterative; early findings were continuously tested and refined through further data collection until reaching a point of information saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher identified that saturation occurred by the 12th interview (the 4th student interview), at which point no new themes or unique insights regarding the mechanisms of sincerity and time discipline emerged. The final three interviews served to confirm and solidify the recurring patterns already identified (Rossouw & Frick, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At-Taqwa Islamic Boarding School (*Pesantren*), the locus of this study, functions as a vibrant educational ecosystem where values are not merely taught but deeply lived. The institution maintains a seamless integration between formal schooling (madrasah) and dormitory life. Its leadership structure is hierarchical yet remains warmly communal, led by a *Mudir* (Head Caregiver) who oversees the *Mushrif* (dormitory mentors) and room guardians. Daily routines are meticulously scheduled, beginning with the *Tabajjud* prayer and congregational *Subuh*, continuing through formal classes, and concluding with evening activities such as *mubadharah* (public speaking) and *muthala’ah* (guided study). Within this intricate ecosystem, the caregiver emerges not as a mere supervisor, but as a “living curriculum”—a dynamic, breathing presence that moves and interacts with the students in every facet of their development (Junedi & Wahidin, 2022).

Field observations and personal interviews bring to light three foundational pillars of exemplarity that anchor the hidden curriculum in this *pesantren* each delivering a profound moral message that resonates far beyond the confines of the traditional classroom (Asif et al., 2020).

First, the practice of authentic and unwavering spiritual exemplarity, most notably embodied through the steadfast observance of *Tabajjud* prayers (Supendi et al., 2020). The caregivers do more than simply rouse students with a knock or the blare of a bell. At 3:00 AM, they perform their rounds, circling the dormitory complex on motorbikes to ensure every room is awake. More importantly, after waking the students, they are immediately seen performing ablution and taking their place in the very first row of the mosque. Ahmad, a senior student, reflected: “*It is impossible for us to complain of laziness. Our Mushrif (mentor) is elderly, yet his eyes sparkle and his attire is pristine when he wakes us. He does not command us to go; he invites us by being there first.*” The message of this hidden curriculum is profound: worship is not a burden of compulsion, but a joyful calling born of heart and steadfast commitment (*istiqamah*). Through this, the value of *ri’ayah* (nurturing care) is deeply felt; the caregivers present themselves not as commanders issuing orders, but as humble servants leading the way.

Second, the embodiment of time discipline as a living expression of integrity (Antes et al., 2019). In every activity—from starting lessons and meetings to sharing meals—the caregivers are almost never late; in fact, they often arrive 10 to 15 minutes early. A young

teacher, Ustaz Fahmi, reflected: “I was once two minutes late because I was setting up the projector. When I walked in, Pak Musbrif was already sitting calmly, reciting *Al-Matsurat*. He didn’t say a word of rebuke, but I felt a profound sense of shame. Now, I always strive to arrive before he does.” Their punctuality is far more than professional etiquette; it is framed as a sacred respect for their mandate and a living manifestation of the Prophetic wisdom that time is like a sword (*al-waqtu ka al-saif*). In this setting, the hidden curriculum teaches that discipline is the concrete expression of responsibility and a deep respect for others.

Third, the power of living by example through a transparent sense of sincerity and humility (Stuart H. Goldberg, 2017). The fact that these caregivers receive no formal salary from the *pesantren* is far from a secret; it is a shared understanding that serves as the very bedrock of their moral authority. They sustain themselves through independent small businesses or family support. One senior mentor, Ustaz Burhan, captures this philosophy with profound simplicity: “Our task here is *tarbiyah* (holistic education). If we measure it in currency, it will eventually vanish. But if we measure it by seeking God’s pleasure and witnessing our students grow in virtue, we are building an eternal treasury.” This life of quiet simplicity, lived without a hint of grievance, communicates a powerful message regarding intrinsic motivation and educational devotion (*jihad tarbawi*). It prioritizes spiritual capital over material gain, embedding a silent yet persuasive lesson: that the most transformative work is fueled by sincerity of heart, not the mechanics of a material transaction.

These noble values are not simply absorbed by students and teachers overnight. Instead, their internalisation unfolds through a series of psychological and social mechanisms that, while deeply complex, feel remarkably organic and intuitive (Kozulin, 2018). At its core, this process mirrors the social learning principles of Albert Bandura, where observational learning and modeling serve as the primary conduits for character transmission (Lesilolo, 2019). Both students and teachers are in a constant state of observing their mentors’ daily conduct, weaving these impressions into their memories and eventually mirroring such behaviors in relevant moments. For instance, a student who is consistently awakened with gentleness will, in time, wake their juniors in that same compassionate manner. This transformative process is deeply anchored by the cultivation of emotional bonds and a profound sense of identification between the mentor and the disciple (Umairi, 2024). Through their profound sincerity and consistency, the caregivers have emerged as ‘significant others’—figures who command deep respect and admiration. This natural drive for identification—the inner desire to emulate their character—triggers a far more profound internalization of values than any verbal instruction could achieve. As Guru Fahmi expressed, “They are more than just superiors; they are our *qudwah* (living examples). Our devotion stems from a place of not wanting to fail the standards they personify.”

Moving forward, this process leads to normalization and the shaping of a communal culture. The consistent sincerity and discipline demonstrated by the caregivers gradually carve out new normative standards within the *pesantren* community (Nasrin et al., 2025). These behaviors eventually evolve into ‘the way we do things here.’ A student who might initially feel forced to wake up for *Tabajjud* begins to see it differently; witnessing the earnestness of their peers and mentors transforms the ritual into something natural, and

eventually, desirable. This positive social resonance creates a nurturing environment where core values are not just taught, but collectively lived and reproduced (Everard et al., 2016).

The synergy between this hidden curriculum and the internalization process ultimately sparks a transformative shift, reshaping both individual character and the collective spirit of the *pesantren* (Salim et al., 2024). At the individual level, both students and teachers begin to cultivate a character deeply rooted in intrinsic values. Their underlying motivation undergoes a fundamental shift—moving away from extrinsic pressures, such as seeking approval or avoiding reprimand, toward an internal conviction where their actions are driven by a sense of moral truth and a profound alignment with their own identity (Bear et al., 2017). At the communal level, a uniquely supportive environment of mutual reinforcement in virtue takes shape. It is a living tapestry of mentorship: the caregivers inspire both teachers and students, teachers draw from the caregivers' example while supporting one another, and senior students embrace the caregivers' values to become beacons for their juniors. This collective flow of character-modeling weaves a continuous 'virtuous circle,' where goodness is not just taught, but breathes through every layer of the community (Croce & Silvia Vaccarezza, 2017).

Ultimately, this hidden curriculum of exemplarity serves as the very soul or ethos that binds the entire educational experience together (Davis et al., 2024). This exemplarity serves as a social glue and moral compass, operationalizing *pesantren* values far more effectively than any written regulation. The formal curriculum, dense with religious and general sciences, finds its true soul within the lived practices of the caregivers. Consequently, At-Taqwa *Pesantren* does not merely transfer knowledge (*ta'lim*); it succeeds in *tarbiyah*—a holistic education that shapes the whole personality—and *ta'dib*—the cultivation of refined manners and noble character that radiates through every facet of community life. This is the essence of true character education: where the most profound learning occurs through the quietude of consistent, meaningful action (Andresen et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the lived examples (*uswatun hasanah*) embodied by caregivers through *Tabajjud* rituals and time management are far more than mere tradition at At-Taqwa *Pesantren*. Instead, they constitute the heart of a highly effective and transformative hidden curriculum. Operating beyond formal documents, this invisible curriculum serves as the primary engine for character education within the boarding school. It functions through three interconnected manifestations of exemplarity: consistent and authentic spirituality, time discipline as an expression of integrity and responsibility, and a transparent sense of sincerity and simplicity. Together, these elements form a coherent value system, sending a powerful message that faith, professionalism, and devotion are inseparable pillars in the life of an educator.

This educational process unfolds through a powerful mechanism of observational learning and modeling, deeply anchored in the positive emotional bonds between caregivers, students, and teachers. Rather than merely hearing advice, students and teachers actively observe, identify with, and eventually internalize the values lived out by their mentors. This journey gradually normalizes into a communal culture, where traits like discipline,

compassion, and sincerity become the expected behavioral standards reproduced by all. Consequently, the caregivers' personal examples foster a holistic, self-reinforcing environment where every member—from leadership and staff to senior and junior students—becomes a vital link in a continuous chain of value transmission.

Overall, this research highlights that successful character education in a *pesantren* depends heavily on the quality and consistency of the caregivers' lived examples. The hidden curriculum they embody serves as the “soul” or *ethos* that breathes life into the formal syllabus, transforming education from a simple transfer of knowledge (*ta'lim*) into a profound process of human flourishing (*tarbiyah* and *ta'dib*). In this context, At-Taqwa has successfully cultivated an ethical learning ecosystem where values are taught through the most persuasive means possible: conscious, consistent, and sincere embodiment. These findings suggest that the most fundamental and enduring strength of education often lies not in what is written, but in what radiates through the moral excellence and lived commitment of its educators.

Despite the significant insights gained from this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, as a mini-ethnographic inquiry, the findings are deeply rooted in the specific cultural and spiritual ecosystem of a single *pesantren*, which may limit the direct generalizability of the results to diverse or secular boarding environments. Second, the four-month duration of observation, while providing a rich ‘thick description’ of daily routines, may not fully capture the long-term sustainability of character internalization after students graduate and enter more heterogeneous social settings. Therefore, future research should consider longitudinal studies to track the persistence of these values in alumni. Additionally, comparative studies involving multiple institutions with different leadership styles—such as more formal or strictly structured systems—would provide a broader understanding of how various ‘hidden curriculum’ models impact student development. Exploring the role of digital media and technology as a contemporary ‘hidden curriculum’ within traditional residential settings also remains a fertile ground for further academic exploration

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