

INSTITUTIONAL ROLE MODELING: MUSLIM CHARACTER FORMATION IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

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Abstract: Prior research on character formation in Islamic education has predominantly focused on curricular approaches and individual teacher roles, leaving institutional role modeling as an integrated value system within early childhood educational structures underexplored, particularly in the Malaysian-Indonesian cross-cultural context. This study aims to analyze institutional role modeling as a strategic pillar of Muslim student character formation at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang, Penang, Malaysia, aligned with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered through participatory observation and in-depth interviews with the principal, teachers, and institutional stakeholders, conducted within the framework of STIT Babussalam's International KPM-PPL Program. Findings reveal that institutional role modeling operates through three complementary dimensions: regulative (Sharia-based school rules), normative (Islamic social values), and cultural-cognitive (collective beliefs). The integration of these dimensions demonstrably cultivates an Islamic school culture that effectively internalizes noble character traits in students. These findings contribute to strengthening the institutional capacity of Islamic educational institutions as holistic character formation models and offer a replicable framework for education policy development in both Malaysia and Indonesia.

Keywords: Institutional Exemplary Behavior, Character Building, Early Childhood Islamic Education, Tadika Perpaduan, Sustainable Development Goals.

INTRODUCTION

Character education is a global agenda explicitly articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which mandates inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. Amidst the increasingly rapid flow of globalization and technological disruption, Islamic educational institutions face a dual challenge: maintaining their Islamic identity while simultaneously preparing an adaptive and character-driven generation. This paradox serves as the starting point for this study: how Islamic educational institutions, particularly those at the early childhood level, can become spaces for authentic and sustainable character formation.

Ideally, Islamic educational institutions should serve not only as a vehicle for the transfer of religious knowledge, but also as an environment that internalizes noble moral values through consistent institutional practices. The Qur'an, Surah al-Ahzab, verse 21, explicitly affirms the concept of *uswah hasanah*, or good role models, as the primary educational method in Islam. However, in reality, various studies show that many Islamic educational institutions emphasize cognitive curricular aspects rather than building an institutional ecosystem that systematically exemplifies character values. This gap between idealism and reality is what drives the urgency of studying institutional role models as a system, not merely individual actions.

International literature reviews indicate that the quality of students' character is strongly influenced by school culture and climate, as products of the institutional system. Scott (2021), within the framework of institutional theory, asserts that institutions are social systems formed by three complementary pillars: regulatory rules, norms, and cultural-cognitive constructs that collectively provide meaning, stability, and legitimacy to social behavior. This framework is relevant for understanding how an educational institution can systematically shape the character of its students, not through regulation alone, but through the internalization of values rooted in the school culture. Research by Berkowitz et al. (2024), published in the *Journal of Character Education*, reinforces the finding that schools with a strong moral climate, built through institutional consistency, produce students with significantly higher social and moral competence.

In the Southeast Asian context, a comparative study of the Indonesian and Malaysian education systems reveals fundamental differences in their approaches to character education. Malaysia implements a more integrated system between formal regulations and the implementation of school culture, where the j-QAF (Jawi, Qur'an, Arabic, Fardu Ain) program and the National

Education Philosophy serve as a strong institutional foundation for the formation of Muslim identity from an early age (Suhid et al., 2014). In contrast, although Indonesia has a Character Education Strengthening Program (PPK) and the Independent Curriculum, their implementation often depends on the capacity of individual schools and teachers, so consistency in character education outcomes remains a challenge (Kurniawan & Dompok, 2024). This difference serves as an important entry point for cross-national studies that can provide valuable lessons for strengthening character education systems in both countries.

The research gap identified in the literature review encompasses two main aspects. First, the majority of studies on role models in Islamic education focus on the personal dimension of teachers (individual *uswah hasanah*), while the institutional dimension, namely how institutional systems and structures collectively exemplify values, remains underexplored empirically. Second, research on character education in Islamic preschools in the multicultural context of Malaysia is still limited, even though early childhood is a critical period for the formation of character foundations that have long-term impacts. *Tadika Perpaduan*, as an inclusive preschool institution under the Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN), offers a unique and strategic case for study.

This study fills this gap by examining in-depth the institutional exemplary practices at *Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang*, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. The novelty of this study lies in: (1) the use of Scott's three-pillar institutional theory framework to analyze Islamic character education practices at the preschool level; (2) a cross-cultural perspective involving institutional collaboration between Indonesian and Malaysian educational institutions; and (3) the relevance of the findings to the SDGs agenda, particularly SDG 4 and SDG 16, which broadens the study's relevance to the realm of international education policy.

The justification for this research rests on three fundamental arguments. From an academic perspective, this study enriches the literature on the management of Islamic educational institutions in Southeast Asia with a more systematic theoretical approach. From a practical perspective, these findings can serve as operational guidance for Islamic educational institution managers in designing effective institutional role models. From a policy perspective, the results of this study have the potential to inform the development of more holistic and evidence-based character education policies in both Indonesia and Malaysia, in line with both countries' commitments to achieving the 2030 SDGs.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach chosen for its relevance in describing social phenomena in depth, contextually, and holistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive paradigm underlying this study allows researchers to understand the meaning behind institutional exemplary practices as experienced and perceived by the participants. The research location is Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, a multiethnic preschool educational institution under the coordination of the Department of National Integration and Integration (JPNIN), which was chosen purposively for its uniqueness as an institution that integrates Islamic character education in a multicultural context.

The research subjects were determined through purposive sampling technique with the following criteria: (1) having direct involvement in the management and implementation of institutional programs; (2) being willing to actively participate in the data collection process. Participants included the principal (1 person), class teachers (4 people), administrative staff (2 people), and selected parents (3 people), a total of 10 informants. Data collection was carried out within the framework of the Community Service Lecture (KPM) and International Field Experience Practice (PPL) program at STIT Babussalam for eight weeks in the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. Data collection techniques included: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews; (2) participatory observation of daily school activities; and (3) analysis of institutional documents including curriculum, regulations, and activity programs.

Data analysis used the interactive analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes four sequential stages: data condensation, data presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification. The analysis process was carried out cyclically and iteratively to ensure depth of interpretation. Data validity was guaranteed through Lincoln and Guba's four criteria: credibility (source triangulation, member checking), transferability (in-depth description), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (researcher reflexivity). Triangulation was carried out by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents (Assingkily, 2021), and involved peer debriefing with two academics in the field of Islamic education management.

Table 1. Research Design and Process Details

Tahapan	Aktivitas	Teknik/Instrumen	Durasi
1. Pre-Field	Document study, permits, preparation of interview & observation guides	Document review, research team FGD	Week 1-2
2. Data collection	In-depth interviews, participant observation, documentation	Semi-structured interview guide, observation sheet, camera	Week 3-6
3. Data analysis	Condensation, presentation, drawing conclusions, verification	Miles, Huberman & Saldaña Models; NVivo (optional)	Week 7
4. Validation	Member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation	Member discussion, expert consultation	Week 8

The research process was systematically designed in four stages over eight weeks. The first stage (Weeks 1–2) was pre-fieldwork, encompassing institutional document review, permit processing, and the development of interview and observation guides through focus group discussions (FGDs) for the research team, to ensure instrument readiness before entering the field. The second stage (Weeks 3–6) was the core stage of data collection through semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation using validated instruments, ensuring the data obtained authentically reflected the reality of institutional exemplary practices. The third stage (Week 7) was data analysis using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) that included condensation, presentation, conclusion drawing, and verification, with the support of NVivo as an optional tool to enhance the accuracy of the analysis. The fourth stage (Week 8) was validation through member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation with experts, to ensure the credibility and confirmability of the findings. This entire flow reflects strict methodological rigor standards of qualitative research, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), so that the findings produced can be scientifically accounted for.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The Regulatory Dimension of Institutional Role Modeling

The regulatory dimension of institutional exemplary behavior at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang is manifested through a set of formal rules that are consistently implemented and exemplified by the entire school community. Field observations revealed that these rules are not merely written on a notice board, but are lived by all stakeholders, from the principal to the school guard. Three main regulations that stand out are: the obligation to dress Islamically (covering the genitals) for all female staff, the congregational Dhuha prayer before the start of lessons, and strict time discipline in all activities.

The principal of the Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang school confirmed this institutional commitment in an interview: *“Here, the rules are not just written. We (me as the principal, all the teachers, all the staff), we live them together. When children see their teachers disciplined with time, speaking politely, and dressing to cover their private parts, that is the most impressive education.”* This statement indicates that the effectiveness of regulation does not lie in the strictness of the rules themselves, but rather in the consistency of the exemplary behavior demonstrated by institutional leaders.

This finding aligns with Scott's (2021) institutional theory, which positions the regulatory pillar as the primary foundation for shaping social behavior within an institution. Rules implemented through consistent, exemplary behavior create stronger moral legitimacy than formal sanctions alone.

Normative Dimension: Islamic Values in Daily Practice

The normative dimension of institutional role models at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang is reflected in the internalization of Islamic values that serve as standards of collective behavior. Eight weeks of participant observation identified four normative values as most dominantly implemented: honesty (amanah), responsibility (mas'uliyah), social concern (ta'awun), and brotherhood (ukhuwah). These values are instilled not through mere verbal instruction, but through consistent modeling of behavior by teachers and staff.

A classroom teacher recounts the practice of internalizing these values: *"Every morning, before class, we pray together. But more than that, I always arrive five minutes before the students arrive. I want them to learn that trust starts with small things like punctuality."* Practices like this illustrate how normative values are not merely declared, but are realized in real actions that can be observed and imitated by students.

Table 2. Normative Values and Forms of Teachers actively help colleagues and students without being asked.

Implementation at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang

Islamic Values	Implementation Form	Exemplary Teacher/Staff	Impact on Students
Trust (Honesty)	No cheating, report found items	Teachers are punctual, transparent in assessment	Children get used to telling the truth
Mas'uliyah (Responsibility)	Maintain class cleanliness, complete assignments	Teachers complete administrative tasks on time	Children are responsible for their work area.
Ta'awun (Social Concern)	Sharing program, helping friends in trouble	Teachers actively help colleagues and students without being asked.	Growing empathy and concern among students
Ukhuwah (Brotherhood)	Cross-ethnic activities, mutual respect	Teachers treat all pupils fairly and warmly	Building brotherhood across ethnicities and religions

Table 2 reveals that the normative dimension of institutional exemplary behavior at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang operates through four core Islamic values implemented in a hierarchical manner, from student behavior, teacher/staff role models, to measurable impacts on children's character. The value of amanah (honesty) is realized through the habit of not cheating and reporting findings, which is supported by the example of teachers who are consistently punctual and transparent in assessments, so that children naturally practice honesty in their daily lives. The value of mas'uliyah (responsibility) is instilled through the habit of maintaining classroom cleanliness and completing assignments, with teachers exemplifying administrative discipline as role models, which has an impact on the growth of students' sense of personal responsibility. The value of ta'awun (social concern) is actualized through a sharing program and a culture of mutual assistance, where teachers demonstrate initiative to help without being asked, so that empathy grows organically among students. The value of ukhuwah (brotherhood) is the most strategic value in the context of Tadika Perpaduan as a multi-ethnic institution, practiced through cross-ethnic activities and the fair and warm attitude of teachers towards all students regardless of background, which ultimately gives rise to authentic brotherhood across ethnicities and religions. Overall, the pattern seen in this table confirms that the effectiveness of internalizing character values is not determined by verbal instructions, but by the consistency of institutional role models that flow from the system to the individual, from teachers to students.

Cultural-Cognitive Dimension: Collective Beliefs as School Atmosphere

The cultural-cognitive dimension is the deepest layer of institutional role models, encompassing collective beliefs shared by the entire school community. At Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang, this dimension manifests itself in the shared belief that every individual, both teacher and student, possesses good innate qualities and is responsible for preserving them. This belief then manifests in a school atmosphere where good behavior is considered the norm, not the exception.

The interviewed parent revealed the tangible impact of this cultural-cognitive atmosphere: *"My child, who used to like fighting, has changed. He told me: 'Mom, fighting is not good, Teacher said so.'* What was surprising was that it wasn't just words, but he actually didn't want to fight anymore. He saw that his teacher never got angry, always patient." This statement illustrates how institutional role models seep into a child's value system through mechanisms of modeling and social identification.

Three-Dimensional Synergy and Its Impact on Character Formation

The most important finding in this study is that the effectiveness of institutional role models in shaping students' character does not depend on one dimension in isolation, but rather on the synergy of all three dimensions: regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive, in an integrative manner. When school rules (regulative) are consistently implemented and exemplified, Islamic values (normative) are continuously lived out in daily interactions, and collective beliefs about good nature (cultural-cognitive) become the school climate, a self-sustaining character education ecosystem is formed.

Concretely, students at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang show significant character development in the following aspects: (1) self-discipline, able to follow the Dhuha prayer routine and queue in an orderly manner; (2) social empathy, taking the initiative to help friends in difficulty without being asked; (3) Islamic identity, understanding and practicing the principles of the Pillars of Faith and the Pillars of Islam contextually; and (4) multicultural tolerance, able to interact harmoniously with friends from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, which is the specialty of Tadika Perpaduan as an inclusive institution.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the relevance of Scott's (2021) institutional theory in the context of early childhood Islamic education. The three institutional pillars, regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive, were shown to work synergistically in building an exemplary ecosystem at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang. This finding aligns with the argument of Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott (2002) in the Annual Review of Sociology that a strong institution is not one with the most regulations, but rather one that successfully integrates these three pillars so that values become part of the collective identity of its members. In the context of Islamic education, this integration means that the formation of noble character cannot rely solely on regulations but requires an ecosystem of values that are authentically internalized.

From a comparative Islamic education management perspective, these findings provide an important contribution to understanding the superiority of the Malaysian system compared to Indonesia in terms of consistent implementation of character education. Hidayah et al. (2025) in their comparative study of Indonesia-Malaysia education management asserted that Malaysia successfully implemented outcomes-based education management that collaboratively engaged the community. This superiority,

as confirmed by the findings of this study, is rooted in the strength of the institutional system, which is not only administrative but also cultural. Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang illustrates how national policies (the National Education Philosophy and the j-QAF program) can be translated into vibrant institutional practices that have a real impact.

The significance of institutional role models as a character-building strategy is also supported by international literature. Berkowitz (2014) found in their research published in the *Journal of Research in Character Education* that schools effective in character building consistently display what they call “a community of practice in virtue,” a community in which all members, not just teachers, model the character values they wish to instill. Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang exhibits similar characteristics: the principal, teachers, staff, and even parents are involved in a cohesive ecosystem of role models.

The relevance of these findings to the SDGs agenda requires further elaboration. SDG 4 not only targets universal access to education but also emphasizes quality education, encompassing the development of 21st-century skills and global citizenship values. The exemplary institutional practices implemented at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang directly contribute to SDG 4.7, which aims to ensure all learners acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, including through values and character education. At the same time, strong institutional capacity and the instilled values of multicultural tolerance align with SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Compared to other character education models in Indonesia, there are significant structural differences in institutional approaches. Montanesa, et al. (2021) noted that the Indonesian education system tends to emphasize cognitive achievement and administrative order, while affective aspects and strengthening school culture as a character ecosystem remain systemic weaknesses. This research finding strengthens the argument that Indonesia needs to shift the orientation of character education policy from a curricular-administrative approach to an institutional-cultural approach, using the Tadika Perpaduan model as an empirical reference.

The role of teachers as role models within an institutional framework also requires special attention. Rahman (2025) emphasized the importance of revitalizing the role of teachers, not merely as instructors, but as bearers of moral values whose professional calling is moral, not merely administrative. The findings of this study confirm and expand on this argument: teacher exemplary behavior will only be effective if supported by a strong institutional

system. Dedicated teachers in a systemically weak institution will struggle to create a sustainable impact. Conversely, a strong institutional system will elevate and maintain exemplary standards even when personnel change.

The practical implications of these findings for the development of Islamic education policy in Southeast Asia are substantial. First, strengthening the institutional capacity of Islamic educational institutions needs to be a priority, not only in terms of infrastructure and curriculum, but also in the systematic development of school culture. Second, teacher training programs need to incorporate “institutional role modeling” competencies, namely the ability to understand and contribute to an institutional system of role models, not just individual role models. Third, character education evaluation mechanisms need to be developed to measure the quality of the cultural-cognitive dimension of institutions, in addition to regulatory and normative indicators that are typically more easily measured.

The limitations of this study need to be frankly acknowledged. Because it used a single-case study approach, generalization of the findings should be done with caution. The unique characteristics of Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang, as an inclusive, multi-ethnic institution under the JPNIN with adequate resources, may not be immediately replicable by all Islamic educational institutions. Multi-site comparative research across various provinces in Malaysia and Indonesia would strengthen the external validity of these findings. Furthermore, the long-term impact of institutional role models on student character development requires a longitudinal research design for comprehensive measurement.

Overall, this study provides a theoretical contribution in the form of an operational elaboration of Scott’s institutional theory in the context of early childhood Islamic educational institution management, as well as an empirical contribution in the form of an in-depth description of institutional exemplary practices that successfully built a character education ecosystem at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang. These contributions open up space for a more productive academic dialogue between institutional theory, Islamic educational management, and the global SDGs education agenda.

CONCLUSION

This study found that institutional role models at Tadika Perpaduan Batu Lancang, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, operate through a synergy of three complementary dimensions: regulative (a system of Sharia-based rules consistently exemplified), normative (Islamic values lived out in daily interactions), and cultural-cognitive (collective beliefs about good nature that

are embodied in the school atmosphere). The integration of these three dimensions, not simply the existence of formal rules or individual teacher role models, has proven effective in shaping the character of Muslim students who are disciplined, responsible, empathetic, and tolerant. The uniqueness of this institution as an inclusive, multi-ethnic preschool makes it a model relevant to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace and Strong Institutions).

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged: the single-case study design limits the generalizability of the findings, the relatively short duration of data collection does not allow for measuring the long-term impact of character formation, and the researcher's involvement as part of the KPM-PPL program may have implications for the subjectivity of observations. Nevertheless, this study provides a significant contribution in the form of a three-dimensional operational framework of institutional role models that can serve as a diagnostic and development instrument for managers of Islamic educational institutions, as well as an empirical reference for designers of character education policies in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Based on these findings, the researchers recommend three strategic points. First, Islamic educational institutions, particularly those at the early childhood level, need to adopt a system-based institutional role modeling approach that places role modeling as a system design, not merely an individual practice. Second, the Indonesian government needs to examine the Malaysian institutional integration model in the Character Education Strengthening Program to shift the orientation from compliance-based to culture-based. Third, further research with multi-site longitudinal and comparative designs is needed to more comprehensively validate this institutional role modeling model and formulate best practices that can be transferred across contexts.

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